WILLIAM MEIKLE
VARIATIONS
ON A THEME

Variations on a Theme
By
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Variations on a Theme
2. Ask the Cosmos
3. Augmented
4. Bait and Switch
5. 1,2. Go!
6. A Waste Disposal Problem
7. At the Trial of the Loathsome Slime
8. The Watcher in the Dunes
9. A Slim Chance
10. To the Sea Again
11. The First Silkie
12. Between
13. Authors Note
14. Acknowledgements

Variations on a Theme

They took Johnny Green from class 3a at ten o' clock on Tuesday morning. He was the last to go. They thought I didn't notice, but I've been onto them for a while now.

It started nearly two weeks ago. Teaching biology is difficult when you've got a teenage audience. Almost every topic on the syllabus has something about reproduction in it, and that reduces your typical youngster to giggles, rude jokes or hysteria. I've got used to it over the last twenty years, and have come to expect the reactions. I've even come to know who to expect them from.

So when Jack Doyle was quiet during my "Asexual reproduction in amoeba" spiel, I knew immediately that something was wrong. And my sense of wrongness really went into overdrive when he stayed behind after class to ask questions.

"So," he asked. "Every new organism produced by asexual reproduction is genetically identical to the parent – a clone in effect?"

"Very astute Jack," I replied. "When did you grow the smarts?"

Jack has never been the sharpest pencil in the box. Usually he sits at the back and throws spitballs at the pretty girls. He has never had a grade higher than a solid "F" and has a flat, dead, stare when asked anything more than the simplest question.

But that day, two weeks ago, was different. This time I got a quizzical look, as if I'd been the one being stupid.

"I've been thinking about stuff," Jack replied.

"Watch you don't strain anything," I said, but didn't get a laugh.

"I want to learn," Jack said. "I want to learn everything."

"Turning over a new leaf Jack?"

I got the quizzical look again.

"I fail to see what plants have to do with it. I thought we were discussing amoeba?"

And that's when it happened.

Jack flickered.

It was just for the space of time it took for me to blink, and I wasn't really sure of what I'd seen. For that millisecond it wasn't Jack Doyle that stood in front of me, but a seven-foot thing that looked more plant than human; green, fibrous and strangely gnarled. It looked like nothing less than a stunted oak sapling.

Then it was gone, and I was getting that quizzical stare again.

"Is there something wrong, Mr. Davis?"

I shook my head, partly to answer the question, partly to clear the remnants of what I might have seen.

And that was it for a couple of days. Nothing unusual happened in my other classes and I even came round to the idea of chalking it

up to tiredness and overwork.

Everything went normally, just the usual daily grind in the classroom.

Until 3a came round to biology again. Jack Doyle continued to be more attentive in class, but that was a good thing… right?

He asked me again about cloning, and that got us into a discussion on ethics and Frankenstein foods that actually had most of the class interested for once… apart from Jack, and Mary Brown. She had taken on the quizzical look I was getting to know.

"Sir," she said. "Can you explain parthenogenesis to us?"

"Certainly," I said. "Parthenogenesis is a form of asexual reproduction found in females where growth and development of embryos or seeds occurs without fertilization by males. It happens a lot in simple plants, and has also been shown in some snakes and amphibians."

Mary put her hand up.

"Sir. Is it true that the offspring produced by parthenogenesis almost always are female?"

I nodded.

She put her hand up once more.

And it happened again.

Mary Brown flickered. And once more I was looking at a gnarled green thing. Instead of a hand, it waved a shoot above the main body of a squat trunk, a shoot with five thin branches, each tipped with a hard thorny edge.

"I want to learn," she said.

"We want to learn," Jack Doyle added.

The rest of the class just sat there, open-mouthed.

"Apomixis," Mary Brown said.

"Reproduction," they both said.

A giggle ran around the room, but it didn't last.

"We want to learn," they said in unison.

They stared straight at me, their eyes black and dead.

"Teach us. Teach us now."

So I taught. It had been a long time since I'd even heard the word Apomixis, but I dredged enough about asexual reproduction in plants from my memory to satisfy them… for now.

I managed to hold myself together till the end of the class, but by the time I got to the washroom I felt ready to scream.

I splashed cold water on my face, and gave myself a long hard stare in the mirror. I didn't look crazy, but it felt as if reality was slowly draining away.

That night I sat at home with thoughts swirling like storm clouds in my mind.

I kept coming back to that single image; the fleshy green shoot above the main body of a squat trunk, the five thin branches, each tipped with a hard thorny edge. And in my mind's eye I saw those same thorns tear into the pale white flesh of Mary Brown.

I drank more whisky than was good for me and tried to settle, but the television was broadcasting its usual inanities and the radio reception was so bad that I was forced to switch it off after a while. I sat at the window, watching a storm build up, until it got too dark to see. And even then I sat, watching my reflection for long minutes before drawing the curtains and closing myself in.

Silence settled around me. Eventually the wind dropped and, apart from my trusty, wheezing, generator there was only the soft patter of rain on the window. Soon I began to hear rhythms in the noise, the weather sending me a coded signal of danger that I was only just unable to decipher.

"Music," I muttered, needing to break the silence. "That's what I need. Something good and loud."

I rummaged around in a box of old tapes discarded by my wife when she left. I put on a compilation of pop songs from a happier time and let the mindless mania wash over me.

For nearly half an hour I managed to lose myself in the intricacies of police work in Ed McBain's 87th Precinct while the music swam around me. I even found myself singing along at one point.

Bang!

Something hit the window, hard.

I looked up to see a branch banging against the glass, leaves pressed flat on the glass, like fingers, prying, trying to reach through.

I was up and out of the chair almost before I knew it.

For long seconds I stood there, my heart pounding a drumbeat in my ears. I half expected to turn and find that I was not alone in the room, but there was only a spilled glass of whisky and a book beside my chair.

The wind dropped.

The branch went back to being just a branch, swaying gently in what was now no more than a breeze.

Slowly… very slowly… my heart rate returned to near normal. But I was very far from being in that state.

I had to do something… anything. But I was at a loss for where to start.

I'm not stupid. I've read all the books, seen all the movies. When the Pod People start to take over, nobody ever believes the first person to notice. And going to the authorities would only result in me being taken off the job.

I had my working hypothesis; that some intelligent alien species was here, in my school, taking over children. Now what I need was patience. Patience to watch, to find out exactly what was happening, patience to test the theory and get real physical proof.

I made my way to bed and at some point I slept, fitfully, only to wake with a start, convinced that they were in the room.

Thin shadows wafted and ran across the ceiling. All I wanted to do was retreat under the covers to a place where I had been safe as a child. But I forced myself to sit up.

I called out.

No one replied. And when I turned towards the window, there were only the trees in the garden, and the streetlight beyond that, throwing shadows into my bedroom.

In the morning I went straight to my laptop.

There was nothing in any of the mainstream news pages of any note, just the usual earthly diet of death and chaos. There was an earthquake in China, concern about the escape of genetically modified crops, and three separate minor wars ongoing in the Middle-East. I had to dig deep, into places where conspiracy theories cluster like ants at a picnic. I found what I was looking for in a UFO chat-room.

"I've been seeing them for days," a lady from Seattle said.

"They're everywhere," a boy from Texas replied. "My mother isn't my mother any more. Oh, she walks, talks, cooks and cleans like my mother. But it's not her. Not in the heart. Not where it matters."

I made some discreet forays onto the boards.

All told I found over a hundred cases similar to my own. No doubt some of them at least were from the usual on-line suspects. But I found three separate descriptions of "stunted plants" and one hysterical youth that had been attacked, in broad daylight by a friend with thorns instead of fingernails.

I drove to school that morning with one eye on the road and one on the people around me… if people they indeed were.

I had 3a again the next day.

By now I knew what I was looking for. Three more had been taken, and had moved to the left side of the room to sit with Jack Doyle and Mary Brown.

I started the day's lesson… one on Speciation, but that wasn't enough for them. Their hands shot up almost as soon as I began.

"Tell us about mutation," they said as one.

"How has punctuated equilibrium been a driver for the selection of intelligence?" they said.

Whatever they ultimately wanted to know, they were learning fast.

So once more I taught, of how natural selection is not only about

the survival of the fittest, but about how naturally occurring mutations can inhabit, and take over, niches previously occupied by other species and how a single genetic advantage can lead to ecological dominance.

They soaked it all up, and demanded more.

I taught them. And while I did so, I learned more about them. By looking out of the corner of my eyes and letting them go slightly out of focus I could see them… not clearly, but enough. They were still the same gnarled mass of green plant-like matter. But as they listened to me, small shoots rose and wafted in the air. Small nodules on the fleshy trunks swelled and pulsed. Some looked ready to burst.

The other children… the human children, knew something was wrong. They kept looking at me, and back at the small group of what seemed like their classmates.

I wouldn't acknowledge their fears. I couldn't, for to do so would give away the fact that I knew them for what they were.

So I kept teaching, and they kept asking questions.

"Tell us about morphic resonance," they said.

And at that they had me stumped. The words had some meaning to me, but I couldn't quite place it. It was near the end of the lesson though, and I was able to talk my way through to the bell.

I could tell they were frustrated, but so was I.

That night, I looked up morphic resonance. I realized I had read something about it in the past; a fringe theory regarding morphogenetic fields that worked by imposing patterns on otherwise random or indeterminate phenomena. It had been used to explain how ideas that rise up in one place, can simultaneously rise up elsewhere when enough of the population have assimilated them.

And turning once more to the chat rooms, I found that ideas were indeed spreading.

"How the hell does my mother know about cellular mitosis?" one asked. "And how does she know a teacher called Bob Davis all the way across the country?"

"The garage attendant grabbed me and demanded to know about punctuated equilibrium. I punctuated his ass for him," another said.

The more I looked, the more the horror grew. My teachings were spreading. Everywhere across the country, the others were learning, and expanding.

As I suspected, things got worse. By the time 3a came round for biology again, Johnny Green was the last one left. He entered the classroom like a whipped dog, and slunk into a seat near the front.

The rest were so confident that they took him, right in front of me. I watched out of the corner of my eye as I talked, telling them

what I'd learned of morphic fields, explaining how it wasn't a recognized scientific paradigm. Even as I spoke, tendrils crept across the room.

Young Johnny never saw it coming. A pustule on one of the green shoots burst, and Johnny's face was covered in a thin film of spores.

He breathed in, coughed once, and flickered.

They had him.

"Tell us about forced mutation," they asked.

"Tell us about genetic manipulation," they demanded.

"We need variation," they said.

Suddenly I was no longer thinking about aliens or off world intelligence.

I was thinking about genetic engineering, about escapes, and about random mutations. I was also thinking about punctuated equilibrium, and wondering whether it wasn't time that the human race got its ass punctuated.

Just as suddenly, I had a theory, but first I had to test a part of it.

At the end of the lesson I gave them a new word. I taught them about chemomute, a chemical reagent used to bring about targeted genetic mutation.

That night, in the chat rooms, I was asked whether I'd heard about the use of the new wonder drug. They used the name I had made up… chemomute.

The next time 3a came round to Biology I was ready.

They were waiting for me.

"Variation," they said. "Teach us."

I showed them a vessel full of a thick liquid.

"Building variation into populations has been something scientists have known how to do for some time," I said. "And it is best demonstrated by an experiment. I think it's time we did some practical work."

Tendrils waved in excitement.

I taught them about the importance of hypothesis, experiment and results gathering.

I taught them how to make chemomute from vinegar, salt and liquid soap.

I taught them how it would bring about natural, spontaneous beneficial variation in any species that used it.

They told all their friends.

Then they drank it.

There are two things I didn't teach them.

The first is that even teachers can lie.

The second is that biology teachers know how to make weed killer.

Ask the Cosmos

Dave was getting roaring drunk. He wasn't enjoying it, but that wasn't the point. The point was that two of the other three people in the room were his best friends, and they were doing better than Dave was -- better at their jobs, better in their sex-lives, better at *life*.

But I'm the better drunk.

The other three had made an effort and were smartly dressed for dinner, but Dave had deliberately chosen a tired and faded shirt. He had the sleeves rolled up to show thin forearms, and he wore a very old pair of denim trousers that he'd owned since back in the day.

When I was the better man.

The remains of a large meal and a heavy drinking session were laid out before them all. Dave took a hefty swig of wine, then remembered he was in the middle of a joke.

"So they find the clitoris is missing... it's been cut away."

He swilled more wine.

"And the nurse says..." He paused, looking around the table. Nobody seemed to care.

In that case, I'll just have to speak louder.

"Go on guess what the nurse says.... Go on."

By now he was nearly shouting. But nobody answered him - nobody even looked interested in answering. He was too far gone to stop.

"She says... It can't have been a man then... He'd never have found it!" He laughed, too long, too loud, spraying a fine mist of wine down his shirt. "He'd never have found it!"

He laughed again, far too loud in the quiet room. The rest of the guests looked weary and bored... not a single smile from any of them.There was a long, embarrassed pause which Dave pretended not to notice. After another large swig of wine he ploughed on. He'd come with the intention of saying what was on his mind, and the drink had now loosened his moral center enough to let it through the usual filters.

"Do you remember Jane, that night in Malaga, when the moonlight played on the sea and we slept on the beach?"

He was *almost* pleased to see Jane look embarrassed. Beside her, and directly across the table from Dave, Jim Barr, Jane's husband went red in the face, but this wasn't embarrassment. This was impending rage.

"Why do you always have to be such a knob-end Dave?"

Jim looked to Dave's right, addressing the woman that sat there -- the one that Dave had been studiously ignoring since he sat down to

dinner.

“He's always been like this Maggie... even when we were students.”

Dave finally turned to look at the woman the others had deemed would be his *date* for the night. She was actually very pretty in a kind of hippy-goth type way, but he wasn’t in any mood to be placated. Besides, she seemed more amused than anything.

I’ll soon put a stop to that.

“And what are you smirking about?”

He struggled to focus.

“Come to think of it… who are you?”

As Dave knew she would, Jane Barr tried to calm the situation.

That’s my girl.

“I told you already Dave,” Jame said. “Maggie's new in the area.”

“So is Tesco,” Dave said. “But you didn’t ask it round.”

Jane ignored him and continued.

“I invited her along to welcome her to town. … We met at my yoga class.”

Dave leered at Maggie.

“Do you do contortions?”

The woman laughed.

“Well, I could tie you in knots.”

She had a soft American accent. Dave was about to reply but the drink had slowed him down by now, and she was already speaking across the table to Jane.

“When you said you'd introduce me to your friends, I thought you meant your sober ones.”

Dave laughed -- too long and too loudly.

“Nobody sober here except us chickens. We've all been drinkers, back since first year at university, since Jane and I got together...happy days.”

Jim Barr butted in.

“There's your problem right there Dave. All you do is talk about 'The good old days', and drink too much.”

“They were the best days of my life,” Dave replied.

“We were young, we were students, we drank a lot. Big deal. What else is there to know? Move on. The rest of us have grown up,” Jim said, his face getting red again.

Jane tugged at her husband's elbow, trying to stop him, but the argument was starting to get heated, and the booze was doing Dave’s talking for him.

“Grown up? Is that what you call it?”

Jim was in no mood to back down.

“You'd rather wallow in your own sad little dream world? Look at the state of you. Get a life Dave.”

“I had a life... once.”

He looked at Jane, then back at Jim.

“You took it away from me.”

Jim sighed loudly.

“Not that old tune again Dave. Give it a rest. It's been nearly ten years... and it was your own fault. It's high time you faced it. You lost it. You had it all. Now look at you. Just another drunk with a grudge.”

Dave stood, too fast, knocking over glasses

“I might be drunk, but you're an uptight prig with a pole up his backside. In the morning I'll be sober. But that pole will still be there.You stole my life. And I want it back. I want what I deserve!”

Glasses flew, tumbled and broke as he banged his fist on the table.

There was a sudden deathly silence.

All anger gone now, Jim spoke softly.

“Dave...”

He motioned down to the table.

Dave looked down to see a long cut on the outside of his hand where he had banged it down on broken glass. The drink had dulled his senses, but his sight was still good enough to spot the long sliver embedded in the wound.

He touched the edges of the glass.

Jane shouted.

“Don't...”

Without thinking Dave pulled the glass out.

“... take it out,” Jane finished.

The wound gaped open. Blood flowed and mixed with spilled wine, causing a dark shadow which lay on the highly polished wood of the table.

Dave sat down, hard.

Jim got up quickly and came round the table.

“Nice shooting Tex. How bad is it?”

Dave held the hand away from him. Thick drops of blood oozed onto the table. Jane also stood to come round the table. Dave waved her away, nearly knocking over another wine glass in the process.

“I'm OK. Don't fuss,” he said.

Jane ignored him and turned to her husband. Just the sight of the look that past betewen Jim and Jane made Dave’s heart *lurch*, and suddenly all he wanted was more booze.

Lots more booze.

“The bandages are in the bathroom cabinet,” Jane said to Jim. “I'll get them. Can you clean up?

Jim, suddenly sober, nodded nd turned back to look at Dave.

“Try not to bleed on the carpet mate... If you remember, I've still got the mop pole up my bum.”

Dave smiled wanly, and felt a well-recognised hint of shame for his inner turmoil.

Lots more booze.

Jim picked up the largest bits of glass and left for the kitchen.

Dave held his arm up, studying the cut. Blood flowed down his arm, pooling in the rolled up sleeves of his shirt around the elbow. At the same time Maggie leaned forward, taking a crystal pendant from around her neck.

“Here. Let me.”

She started to run the crystal along the length of the cut. Dave took a while to focus, then pushed her away roughly.

“Hey! What do you think you're doing?”

“I'm using the healing energy of the crystal to rebalance your blood flow and...”

“Well you can stop that right now. I don't believe in any of that.”

Maggie smiled.

“That doesn't matter. It's working anyway. Look. You've stopped bleeding.”

Dave looked at his hand. The bleeding had indeed stopped. But he wasn’t about to become a convert - not to this doe-eyed hippie.

“And the fact I'm holding my hand above my heart has nothing to do with it? Hello? Has no one else done O level Physics here?”

He pushed her further away.

“Healing crystals? It's a bloody rock. It has less healing energy than an aspirin. Do you want to stick some needles in me as well? Or maybe we can do some aromatherapy?

“A better smell around here might be nice.”

She was still smiling, and that just made Dave push harder.

“I'll tell you what... I'll fart, and you can tell me how I'm feeling.”

The smile got wider.

“Bitter. Very bitter.”

“Ho ho. Very funny. Away and play in the garden. There's plenty of trees needing a hug out there.”

The smile finally slipped.

Got her!

“Jim was right,” she said. “You need to ask the cosmos for a life.”

Jane came back in, carrying a small first aid box.

“I've been hearing about that recently...Ask the Cosmos... What's that all about?” she asked Maggie. Dave butted in before the woman

could reply.

“Superstitious claptrap bollocks...that’s what it is.”

Jane held up a bandage.

“Are you going to play nice, or do we have to tie you up?”

I never could refuse her.

“Give me another drink and I'll be as good as a very good thing at obedience classes.”

Jane started to bandage Dave’s hand, grimacing at the mess.

“Come on Maggie. Tell us about this 'Cosmos' stuff. It'll take my mind off this,” she said.

“If we're going to be listening to a load of old bollocks, I need a drink first.” Dave shouted.

Jim returned, on cue, carrying a full bottle of whisky.

“Just one more. A wee nightcap,” he said, and Dave smiled.

“You had the pole removed.”

Jim smiled back.

“No. I'll need surgery for that. Thanks for reminding me.”

“Hey. That's what friends are for.”

Jim poured the drinks while Jane kept working on bandaging Dave up.

“Maggie?” she said. “You were going to tell us about the Cosmos thing?”

Maggie took a glass of whisky from Jim when offered, and took a long sip before replying.

“It's the latest thing in California.”

Dave grunted, but a look from Jane quitened him fast as Maggie continued.

“It works on the principle that everything in the universe is connected.”

Dave couldn’t help himself.

“It's called Quantum Theory dearie.”

Jane gave him a slap on the shoulder.

“We've listened to your crap patter all night Dave. Give it a rest.”

Anything for you darling.

He went quiet and stared glumly into his drink as Maggie started to warm to the task.

“The theory goes that if you make a request to the universe in the right way, then the cosmos will grant your wish.”

Dave kept his tongue, but it seemed the whisky had loosened Jim’s.

“It pains me to say this,” he said. “But I'm with Dave on this one. It sounds like more Californian New Age bollocks to me.”

Dave and Jim clinked their glasses together. Dave was about to

say more, but was stopped once more by a sharp glance from Jane. She finished bandaging his wound.

“There. All better.”

Dave flexed the bandaged hand and smiled sheepishly. But Jane had already turned away to listen to Maggie.

“Never underestimate the power of the universe,” Maggie said.

“Oh, I'm very careful around huge inanimate objects... they might fall on me,” Dave said, earning him another of *those* looks from Jane.

At least she’s noticing me.

“Maybe we should give it a go sometime?” Jane said.

Dave took a large gulp of whisky.

“To hell with sometime. There's no time like the present.”

He turned to Maggie.

“What do we have to do?”

Maggie looked at Dave and smiled.

“It could be dangerous,” she said.

There looked to be a hint of sadness in her eyes, and maybe condescension. That pushed Dave into more taunts.

“It's put up or shut up time... or are you all mouth?”

Maggie looked across at Dave, and this time the anger was obvious.

“OK. Let’s do it. Can I have some paper and pens please Jane? And do you have four envelopes?”

While Jane was away Dave and Jim helped each other to more of the whisky. Dave was getting a buzz on again, and the pain from his hand had dulled to a mild ache. He knew he’d pay for it in the morning.

But that’s nothing new.

A minute later they all had pen and paper in front of them on the table.

Dave pretended to write while reciting *sotto voce* .

“Dear universe. Sod off and die.”

“Dave!”

That came from Jane.

“Live long and prosper?” Dave said, and Maggie laughed.

“Better. But not couched properly.” She paused and looked at the other three. “The thing to remember is that you should ask directly, say please, and ask for something you really want.”

Dave snorted.

“What a load of old bollocks.”

Maggie looked about ready to take his head off.

“Just remind me. Who's idea was this?” she said.

The other three started writing. Dave stared at the blank paper.

“Tell me again... how is this supposed to work?”

Maggie began as if reciting something she’d read.

“The universe is more than just a collection of atoms. Advances in physics have proved that. A particle can also be a wave form, and Heisenberg showed us that the particle's state could be changed just by looking at it. Nothing can be observed without the observer having an influence. And that influence is what has created the universe that we perceive around us. In many ways it is a construct of our minds. The collective subconscious acts as a filter through which we create the consensual reality that we all experience. When we ask the Cosmos for a favour, we are really asking ourselves for a way to change our view of reality to one that is more favorable.”

Dave laughed loudly.

“Ah... psychobabble... I recognize that right enough... I remember when...”

Maggie’s chair screeched on the floor as she pushed it backwards in anger.

Dave laughed again. Jane put a hand on Maggie’s arm and gently motioned her back into her chair before turning to Dave.

“Oh for God's sake Dave, let's just get on with it.”

Jane started writing, tongue between her lips as she concentrated.

Dave watched her then wrote.

“Please Cosmos, I want Jane Barr.”

Jim leaned over and filled Dave's glass.

“Have some more, mate. It's the one you got me for Christmas.”

Dave looked, from Jane to Jim and back again. Disgusted with himself, he scratched out what he'd written, and replaced it with one long sentence that he wrote so feverishly that his new bandage went from white to red and two fresh drops of blood fell to the paper to be incorporated into his handwriting.

Finished, he looked up to see that the others had also written their wishes.

“I'll show you mine if you'll show me yours?” he said to Jane.

Maggie was insistent.

“No. You mustn't let anyone else know. Fold your papers up, and put them in here.”She gave each of them an envelope. “I’ll pop them in a post box for us all.”

They all did as she told them.

“Who do we address it to? Sanity Claus?” Dave said. He left a smear of fresh blood on the envelope trying to get the sheaf of paper inside.

“No need,” Maggie said, collecting the four envelopes. “The cosmos knows where each needs to go.” She checked her watch.

“Speaking of which... I've got to be going too.”

“Nonsense,” Dave said, making for the whisky bottle. “The night is yet young...”

Jane spoke softly.

“It's half past one Dave. Some of us need to get to work in the morning.”

~-o0O0o-~

When he woke his headache was every bit as bad as he thought it might be. He staggered to his bathroom and had a perfunctory wash, deciding to leave a shave until his hands were steadier. After putting on the coffee machine he went to the front door to check for mail.

A single white envelope lay on the mat. As he bent down, having to fight off a vomit reflex, he saw the red mark where he’d smeared blood the night before.

“Superstitious claptrap bollocks,” he whipered like a mantra as, without opening it, he tore the envelope into small pieces and shoved the remains deep into his trouser pocket. That made him feel strangely better. The feeling of general well-being lasted the space of two cigarettes. That’s when his phone rang.

“Dave?” Jane sounded like she’d been crying, her tone exactly the same as the day she’d told him she’d finally had enough.

What did I do this time?

It soon became apparent that this time was different.

“Did you get your envelope back?” she asked. There was something else in her voice too. Dave thought it might be fear. He wasn’t ready to face that.

“No,” he said. “And from what I can remember of last night, I don’t expect to either. It’s all a load of old...”

“Bollocks,” she finished. “Yes. You said. But something’s happened. Can you come round?”

“Will Jim be there or is he still at work?” He was dismayed to hear the *whine* and the *hope* in that question. If Jane heard it, she didn’t show it.

“It’s four o’ clock in the afternoon Dave,” she said with a sigh. “By the time you get here, Jim’ll be home. Maggie’s coming round too. We need to talk.”

She would say no more, beyond urging him to stay sober this time.

~-o0O0o-~

He *almost* complied, but he'd needed a large stiffener before leaving the house, and that had turned to two before he got out the door. He thought the walk round to their house would clear his head, but when Jane opened the door she took one look at him and shook her head sadly.

"I *knew* I should have asked for the Cosmos to make you sober."

Dave thought about protesting, but she had already turned away from him in disgust, leaving him, to shut the door behind him. By the time he arrived in their kitchen Jane had already sat at the table. Maggie and Jim were already there nursing cups of coffee.

I should have brought a bottle.

Jane poured a coffee for him but he left it untouched in front of him.

"So what's the big emergency?"

He looked over at Jane and realised he'd misjudged her tone -- misjudged it completely. It wasn't fear or worry he saw on her face. It was joy. And Dave wasn't sure he wanted to know the cause. He was even more sure when she spoke.

"I'm pregnant," she said. She smiled, and something inside Dave broke.

"Congratulations," he said, and lifted his coffee cup to hide his face -- he couldn't let her see his disappointment.

Jim looked like the cat that got the cream.

"We've been trying for ages. I thought I was firing blanks but..."

Jane took an envelope from a pocket and lauid it on the table.

"I'm not quite sure how. But whatever we did last night, it worked."

Dave was too far lost in his disappointment to put up much of a fight.

"That's not possible..." he started, but Jim interrupted him.

"That's what I thought. But I got my envelope back this morning too. And when I got into the office, they gave me the news. You're looking at the new Vice President of sales for Europe."

Dave laughed.

"You could have asked for anything in the whole Universe, and you opted for the keys to the executive lavatory?"

Jim smiled.

"Well, when you put it like that... but it's ten grand a year more, and a whole load of fringe benefits and..."

Jane stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"The thing is Dave, it worked. For both of us."

"And what about you?" Dave said, looking at Maggie. "Did you get what you asked for?"

"Not yet," she said. "My post must be delayed. But I fully expect

it any minute now. Are *you* sure you didn't get anything?"

Dave shook his head, afraid to repeat his earlier lie. He gripped his coffee cup tight.

I really need a drink.

It was Jane who made him show his hand.

"Come on Dave. You're hiding something. I know you too well."

I never could refuse you anything.

He dug around in his pocket and dropped the torn fragments of paper on the table in front of him.

"There," he said. "Happy? I got the bloody envelope. But I can tell you know, I didn't get my wish."

He saw that Maggie was looking at him with some concern.

"That's right," he said bitterly. "And you want to know how I know? Because *you* are still here. You're *all* still here."

Maggie went white.

"What did you ask for Dave? What in God's name did you ask for?"

Dave started to rearrange the torn strips of paper in front of him. Finally he got the jigsaw of pieces together and slid them carefully across the table. Jane was still looking Dave in the eye, so it was Jim who bent over to read what was written there.

"Dear Cosmos. Please just go away and leave me alone."

Jim poked at the papers with his finger.

"And written in blood too by the looks of things."

Maggie looked like she might faint.

"What *have* you done?"

Dave laughed.

"Done? I've done nothing. It's all a load of old..."

Jim stood back, a puzzled look on his face. Down on the table the scraps of paper were spinning slowly.

"What is this?"

The papers started to swirl faster, a chill wind rising in the confines of the dining area.

"Maggie?" Jim said, puzzled. "Is this your doing?"

She didn't get time to to answer. All the lights in the house switched on at once, the bulbs getting steadily brighter and brighter, until, finally they all blew in a series of small explosions.

Electric sparks ran across the light switches with a hiss, and smoke came as all the cabling up the walls burned.

Everything fell suddenly dark. There was just enough streetlight coming in from outside for Dave to see three pale frightened faces across the table from him. Smoke from the burnt cabling drifted, like thin fog, across the room.

Jim was the first to move. He stretched out a hand towards

where the fragments of paper continued to swirl on the table top. His hand *jerked*, as if he'd touched a live wire and he was thrown across the room as if hit by a lorry. His body hit the far wall and fell to the floor, contorted and broken.

Dave was still sitting, stunned, when Jane jumped out of her chair, heading for her husband.

"Jane. No!" Dave shouted.

He was too late. She bent, touched Jim's body, and was thrown four feet backwards to crash into a doorframe with a too-loud *crack*. Dave knew before he looked that her eyes would show no more than a dead stare.

Maggie and Dave looked across the table at each other dumbstruck. Maggie showed more gumption than Dave could manage. She took a white envelope from her pocket and thrust it at Dave.

"Quick she said," handing it to him. "There's still time to reverse this."

Dave was watching the small vortex on the table top, the scraps of white paper, stained red where he had bled.

It's all my fault.

He smashed his cup on the table.

"It was me... my years of self pity, blaming the people round the table, anybody but myself. All that despair, focused into a moment's rage. That is what we have to undo... what I have to undo."

He raised his fist.

"It was all my fault. I want what I deserve."

He banged his fist down on the table. A shard of broken cup sliced deep into the previous wound. He pulled the shard out, and blood pooled once more on the table.

It was all my fault.

He opened the envelope Maggie had given him. There was a single sheet of paper inside with a meticulously neat sentence written there.

"*Please Cosmos, I know he's an arsehole, but I want Dave."*

He looked over at Maggie.

"Maybe later darling."

Dipping his finger in blood he wrote two words on the paper. Even as he did so the vortex started to spin faster. The wind rose to a howl that dragged loose cups and saucers across the table towards it. The spinning center became a coreolis whirl of smoke and paper scraps spiralling down to a black hole at the bottom.

"Hurry," Maggie said, coming round the table towards him, fighting all the way against the rising wind. She had to grab the table edge tight to shuffle her way round to him.

"What did you write," she said, having to shout above the wind

which now roared like a jet engine. The table fell in on itself, wood *cracking* like the pop of an automatic pistol. Dave had to grab Maggie as she staggered and was almost drawn in to the inverted-cone funnel that danced across the floor, a tornado looking for something to *suck*.

"*What did you write!"* she shouted again, more insistent.

"Forget it," he shouted back. He flung the paper forward and it was whisked away into the howling tornado. Then neither of them were able to talk. Despite all their efforts to pull away the spiralling vortex grew, sucked, and consumed them in an instant.

Dave's cosmos went away in a flash of white, then there was only blackness.

~-o0O0o-~

Dave was getting roaring drunk. He wasn't enjoying it, but that wasn't the point. The point was that two of the other three people in the room were his best friends, and they were doing better than Dave was -- better at their jobs, better in their sex-lives, better at *life*.

Augmented

I had a strict Scottish Protestant upbringing. Church every Sunday, with Sunday School afterwards, Religious Education classes at High School, and prayers every morning at assembly.

It didn't take.

I grew up, not atheist, but agnostic. To me, organized religion was an oxymoron… the two were incompatible. I had no belief in an overarching figure sitting on high meting out punishment or pleasure based on rules he gets to change when he feels like it.

That all changed last year.

One wet night in Spring I prayed, for the first time in over thirty-five years. I prayed, not to my god, but to my parent's god.

They needed him. They were both in their seventies and dying. Not quickly, but slowly, agonizingly, from a range of ailments too painful to list.

And I could do nothing but watch. After one particularly harrowing hospital visit I found myself kneeling on the floor by my bed with little idea as to why I was there. Part of me remembered though.

I was there for two hours. I prayed and I cried in equal measure. There was no catharsis. I crawled into bed feeling just as shitty as before and more than slightly disgusted with myself.

I didn’t expect an answer. Then again, maybe that’s the best time to get one.

It came that next night. Rob came over for a beer and I got maudlin. Six or seven beers in we had reverted to the teenagers we’d left behind too many years ago – we speculated about prayer, and religion, and Rob showed me a new party trick.

He took a pocket watch from his jacket and let it hang on the length of its chain. It hung straight down, unmoving.

“Put your hand below the watch,” he said. “Palm up.”

I did as he asked.

The watch started to move. First it swayed from side to side then slowly started to spin in a circle that widened until the watch rotated slowly above my hand.

“Take your hand away,” Rob said.

Again I complied.

The watch stopped moving and went back to hanging dead on the end of the chain.

“Now you try it,” he said, handing me the watch.

I took it from him and held it by the chain. The watch hung

dead until Rob put his hand under it, whereupon it immediately started to spin in a circle.

When Rob took his hand away, the watch went dead again.

I examined the watch.

"You're doing it wrong," Rob said. "You're looking at the dancer rather than the dance."

He took the watch back and held it over his beer. It swung in a much wider circle this time.

"Everything has a vibration. Even the beer," he said.

"Let me try again," I said.

I took the watch from him and held it by the chain, letting it still before putting my hand under it.

"It will also answer questions," Rob said softly. "Your unconscious knows a *lot* more than it tells you, but you can fool it and get an answer using the pendulum."

"How?"

"Just let it hang and ask a question you know the answer to," he said. "It will respond with either a yes or no, true or false."

Here goes nothing.

"Is my name Pat Doyle?"

The watch started to swing, slowly at first then gathering momentum until it swung, in a tight three-inch circle.

"OK," Rob said. "You're a *clockwise positive."*

"What?"

He pointed at the watch.

"Clockwise spin for a true response."

"Does it do any other tricks?"

Rob laughed.

"This isn't a *trick*. There's something going on here. And yes, it does other *tricks*. It picks up on emotion. Laugh, and it'll swing faster, use it when you're hungry and it'll rotate in a big slow circle… that kind of thing."

"That doesn't prove anything," I said.

"No. But it is *indicative* of something. To quote the Bard, *This is wondrous strange.* It gives me hope, that there is more to life than just blood and flesh, that there might just be a point beyond just staying alive as long as possible."

I wasn't really listening to him. I had been watching the chain hanging from his hand, and my gaze moved to my guitar. Whether by happy accident, or by some magical design, the old Gibson chose that moment to *hum*.

"Obviously it works through some kind of harmonic detection," I said. "And if that chain works, then so should guitar strings."

I hooked the instrument up to the Variaxe set up and turned up

the gain. It was a very small effect, but there was no denying it was there. Simply by placing my hand a foot above the strings, there was a noticeable sympathetic harmonic being set up in the strings.

We started to experiment – me making chord shapes with my left hand while Rob ran a gamut of emotions and concentration exercises near the pickups.

We soon identified that different chord structures were indicative of different emotions – A Minor for hunger, G Major for laughter, F7th for anger, and on, in a seemingly limitless set of combinations. D Minor 7th proved to be the one that gave me the breakthrough. Rob had been getting steadily more excited, more *joyous*. The strings vibrated in sympathy. I fed the resulting chord through the Variaxe, amplifying and double, triple then quadruple tracking it until it sounded like an angelic chorus. I turned the amp up and *blasted* the chord through the room.

The feeling of ecstasy that blew through me was overwhelming, leaving me panting and exhausted, a huge smile plastered over my face.

It was like a light switching on over my head.

Did I mention that I work in advertising?

I started small.

An animated web advert for car insurance was due to run over the whole of the Scottish demographic for two weeks. I slipped some music into it that I'd *composed* while thinking about my mother getting better.

Two weeks later her cancer was in remission, she was sitting up in bed, and thirty thousand new members had joined various churches in the Highlands. After that I ramped it up a notch or two, slipping my *power* chords into national campaigns across the net and on network television.

Within three months both my parents were up and walking. Church attendances all across the country were up by over a hundred per cent.

Somebody noticed.

He was waiting for me in my office one Monday morning, sitting relaxed behind my desk as if he owned it. I recognized him straight away… Jim Reader ran one of the biggest Ministries on TV. Friend of politicians, kings and pop stars, his smile and charm headed a multi-billion pound empire that stretched all across the planet.

He wanted more. When he mentioned the amount of money he could put in my pocket, so did I.

That very day we started placing *chords* in ads across the media, both domestic and international. They had all been composed while focussing on a picture of his grinning face. Within a week his ministry

had doubled and there were reports of new converts to Christianity, via his Ministry of course, all across the third world.

Towards the end of that week my mother called to say that she wasn't feeling too well. I knew exactly what to do. I placed a couple of chords in ads and went back to subverting the campaigns of automobile companies.

The money rolled in. So did the converts. We used the cash to get into more ad campaigns, in more countries, for more time.

By the end of that first month tensions in the Middle East were running high due to the numbers of new Christian converts. Jim Reader went on TV to calm the troubled waters. His face appeared in TV, newspapers and magazines across the world. We used the opportunity to place more chords in more ads.

Mum got worse and Dad started to feel ill again. Jim Reader's subliminal ads took up all my available slots, but I hired the best doctors that money could buy and went back to working on the campaign.

Two months later Jim Reader announced his intention to run for President of Europe. His war chest filled that same day. More screen time followed, with more of our introduced chords embedded. The next day showed that he had an unprecedented ninety per cent approval rating in the polls. A clamour arose for his immediate elevation to the presidency.

Mum and Dad went back into hospital the same day that Jim Reader changed water into wine at a wedding for one of his flock. I ran chords in as many ads as I could – but I had left it too late. Mum died the day Reader entered Brussels on an open topped bus to a ticker-tape welcome. Dad died as he was being sworn in.

I refused to work for him any more. I cited my parent's deaths as a reason for a need to pull back on my involvement. His people were very understanding. I never got to know what Reader himself thought as he was by now in an elevated world surround by twelve disciples who filtered any access to him.

Just this morning the UN handed him supreme power.

Which is why I slipped an extra chord into the backing music that would be played before his acceptance speech. It was composed while staring at a single picture, of Reader nailed to a cross, and a simple message.

HE IS THE ANTICHRIST.

A lot of people will hear it.

Bait and Switch

"Are we there yet?"

George Watkins sighed and turned to look downstream. His son Bobby was thirty yards behind, and dawdling.

I guess we're just too far from the TV and the video games for his liking.

"Nearly," George shouted. "It's just round the next bend."

"You said that ten minutes ago," Bobby wailed.

This trip up the Monongahela was supposed to be *character building*, a chance for George to bond with a kid he was rapidly losing to the enticements of the internet and games machines. He'd thought that a fishing trip would bring them closer together.

So far it wasn't going according to plan.

"Come on son," he said. "There's a big trout up there just waiting to be our supper."

The boy kicked at some pebbles, sending them scuttling into the river. He never raised his head.

But at least he's following.

When they turned the corner they saw the creek spread out before them, with the rock shelf and ruined cabins at the far end.

"Why did people live out this far?" Bobby asked.

George took this as an encouraging sign. At this stage even a simple question was progress.

"Well there's mine workings all over these hills and..."

But the boy seemed to have lost interest already. He fished a cell-phone from his pocket and put his head down again.

George sighed and set his sights on the rock shelf, their campsite for the night. Ten minutes later they pitched camp in the ruins of the Taylor and Nichols cabins. Rather, George got the tent up and started in on collecting firewood for later, while the boy moped around trying to get a signal on his phone. George resisted the urge to bawl the kid out, trusting that the lure of fishing would grab as quickly as it had taken hold of George himself at the same age.

Wait until we get that first nibble of the day, George thought. *He'll come round soon enough.*

But even after they'd set up on the riverbank and George had caught a fine two pounder for supper, still Bobby remained resolutely unimpressed.

"If you don't cheer up, I'll feed you to the Ogua," George said.

The boy's head finally rose from where he'd been staring at the phone, even though it was currently switched off.

“What’s an Ogua?”

George smiled inwardly.

I’ve caught him.

“It lives hereabouts,” he said quietly. “The Iroquois say it’s as big as a bear, with a hard shell like a turtle and a thick tail that can break a man’s back. By day it stays under the water. But at night it comes out, looking for deer... or anything else it can drag way to its den.”

Bobby’s eye’s had gone big and wide open.

Time to reel him in.

George waved in the direction of the ruined cabins.

“That’s why the folks who built these here dwellings had to leave. The Ogua got all their cattle... and they were afeared it was coming for them next.”

George looked out over the still river, remembering how his own father had told him the story, in this same spot. He cast the line, sending the weighted lure over to the far bank where it landed with a soft *plop*.

“Its den is about there I reckon,” he said. “At least that’s where your Great-Granddaddy saw it, back in Fifty Five. It gave him such a fright his hair went white. And do you know...”

He never got a chance to finish. The boy’s cell phone rang, the blast of tinny music breaking any spell George had woven.

“Yay. I got a signal,” Bobby shouted, happier than George had seen him all day.

He was on the phone all the time while George got a fire going and cooked the trout. He only put it down to eat. George tried to interest him in the beauty of the sunset, but the boy sat there, head down, thumbs working frantically, lost in a world George would never understand.

He did get the lad to switch it off as they got into their sleeping bags. Bobby wanted to stay in the tent. George prefered to lie out in the open, like he had in his youth. When he woke to take a leak around midnight he saw a tell-tale blue glow from the phone’s display just inside the tent. By then he was too dis-spirited to get into an argument about it.

First thing in the morning, we’re outa here. It’ll be best for both of us.

After that, sleep wouldn’t come. He lay on his back, staring up at the Milky Way and remembering nights such as this with his own father; the anticipation of the fishing to come the next day, the feeling of *closeness* with his old man he feared he’d never achieve with Bobby.

It was nearly two o’clock when he rolled onto his side. There was still a faint glow from the tent where the boy lay.

Enough is enough.

He moved to climb out of his bag.

And that's when he heard it... a soft *slump* as something pulled itself out of the water, barely five yards from where he lay.

Bobby!

He rolled, still coccooned in the bag, ignoring the stones and twigs that poked and prodded even through the nylon, making for the tent.

"Bobby!" he said in a whisper that wanted to be a shout.

Something big moved across the ground towards him, twigs snapping and pebbles tumbling with small splashes into the river. Above that there was *breathing*, a liquid gurgle.

"Bobby!" he said, louder this time. He shucked off the sleeping bag. It was grabbed from his grasp and whisked away. He heard the sound, very close now, as whatever had come out of the water tore the nylon with loud *rips*.

He had no time to think. He almost pulled the tent out of the pegs as he threw the flap open.

"Bobby!"

The tent was empty.

"Over here," a small voice shouted from among the cabin ruins. George could just make out the faint blue glow of the phone.

He felt the air move over his head and something large and heavy *swished*, just missing him. He tried not to remember the stories, of how the Ogua could break a man's back with its tail. He headed in a stumbling run for Bobby's location.

The Ogua followed. It tore the tent to shreds, the *ripping* loud in the quiet night. The moist breathing got louder and there was a clicking noise that George realised could only be claws... claws scratching on stone. He made out a shape in the darkness. The thing that followed him across the camp ground was tall, almost as big as George himself and twice as broad. A long tail, eight feet of more, stretched out behind it, swishing from side to side, balancing the creature's stumbling forward steps on its stubby rear legs. It closely resembled a dinosaur from the old movies, but its back was protected by a thick carapace, glimmering in the moonlight like oil on tortoiseshell. The eyes were the worst -- almost perfect circles, like small saucers, and milky white like fine porcelain. They tracked George's every movement as the Ogua came forward, hands bearing long knife-like claws clenching and unclenching, anticipating the rending of flesh.

George reached the cabin ruins just ahead of the Ogua. There was no sign of the boy as he skipped across fallen timbers and rocks.

"Bobby!"

"Over here," a voice called. The dim blue light showed at the

edge of the forest.

"Stay there, I'm coming," he called back and ran faster.

The Ogua followed, tossing timber aside as if it were matchsticks. George fled into the woods. The boy had already moved on, the blue glow bobbing as it moved further into the trees.

"This way," Bobby called.

"Wait," George replied, but all too soon the blue glow was lost in the thickets. He had no choice but to follow. And as he went after Bobby, so the Ogua pursued him. He ran, almost blind in the dark, branches and thorns tugging and tearing at clothes and skin. The Ogua *crashed* through everything, breathing louder now, panting like a hot dog. Something *pulled* at George's ankle and he let out a yelp, but it was just a twig, He tore away from it, leaving the lower half of a pant's leg behind.

"Over here," he heard Bobby shout above the noise of the Ogua. "Quick. This way."

He ran, ignoring the hot blood flowing from numerous small scrapes and tears. Finally he saw the faint blue glow ahead of him. It was still, unmoving.

"Jump," Bobby shouted. "Jump now!"

He didn't think. He leapt, aware of crossing a dark void, landing hard and toppling sideward. A small hand steadied him.

"Run," George shouted, making a grab for the boy. "It's nearly here."

The Ogua crashed through the trees, white eyes shining almost silver in a thin wash of moonlight. George turned to run again, but Bobby put a hand on his shoulder.

"It's okay."

The Ogua came on hard... then lost its footing and fell away, the liquid breathing turning to a screech as it tumbled into a dark hole, scrambling frantically. It kept trying to reach George, tail thrashing wildly, but all it managed to do was send timber and debris falling, hastening its descent.

It dropped away into darkness, the screech fading.

Silence fell.

George leaned over slowly and looked down into an old mineshaft, the walls now only partially shored. Below there was only deep quiet blackness.

Bobby came and stood beside him, a big grin on his face.

"How did you do that?" George asked.

Bobby held up the phone.

"Research and GPS," he said, smiling.

George looked at the phone, seeing it through the boy's eyes for the first time.

“It looks like I need someone to bring me up to date with all this new-fangled stuff. Want a job?”

Bobby smiled.

“Okay, Dad.”

Hand in hand, father and son headed back to what was left of their camp.

George realised someting else.

“You used me as bait didn’t you?”

Bobby looked sheepish.

“I saw it in a game once. It worked that time as well.”

George ruffled the boy’s hair.

“Maybe fishing *is* your thing after all.”

1,2, GO!

The day started so quietly that by one-thirty I was considering giving in and heading for the *Twa Dugs* for a beer. I'd got as far as clearing my desk in preparation for leaving when there were heavy footsteps on the stairs. The man who entered was small and unkempt with a mop of dark uncombed hair and rumpled clothes that looked like he'd slept in them for a week.

As he walked over towards me I realized I'd seen him before, in the bars around the Campus, always bent over a notebook, scribbling furiously. I'd never paid him much attention – eccentric academics are ten-a-penny around here.

I was just about to find out *how* eccentric this one was.

"Derek Adams?" he asked.

I got out of my seat and shook his hand, then motioned him to the other chair.

He took his time to settle, his gaze flickering around what passed as my office. I lit up a Camel and left it up to him where to start. I knew from long experience that it could go several ways. Some of my clients needed to be coaxed into revealing what brought them here… but this one didn't waste any time once he decided he was going to talk.

Over the next ten minutes I discovered more than I needed to know. His name was Dave Laws, Professor of Mathematics and Physics, he lived in a big house on the river, he was married, and he was a very worried man.

He saved the best for last. And despite my years of experience and the many varieties of *weird* I'd heard across the desk, I was left almost speechless.

"At two-thirty-two in the afternoon on Saturday I'm going to kill my wife," he said.

I laughed.

"This is a wind-up, right? What do you want me to do? Stop you?"

He laughed back at me, harshly, like the bark of a small angry dog.

"No Mr. Adams. I want you to help me. Both of our futures depend on it."

By now I was convinced I had a nut-job on my hands. I should have tossed him out on his arse, but there was something so *serious*, yet sad, about him that made me probe further.

"I wouldn't presume to know my future if I were you," I said. "I rarely know myself from one day to the next."

He laughed again.

"Then I really do know better than you. I've seen it you see. If I don't kill my wife then both you and I will be dead by Saturday evening."

A cold chill ran up my spine. I don't know why, but suddenly I believed this man, and something told me it was time to start paying serious attention.

"So, do you have a crystal ball or something?"

"Something," he said. "I've built a time machine."

I had no answer to that. I covered my confusion by lighting another Camel.

"You don't believe me," he said, looking at his watch. "But in thirty seconds you'll have your proof."

He turned to look at the door. I heard more heavy footsteps on the stairs. The door opened. A small unkempt man opened the door and peered in. I wouldn't have been too surprised if it weren't for the fact that he wasn't already sitting in the chair opposite me.

"Bugger. Too late," the man in the doorway said, and left at a hurry.

The version of him in the chair turned back to me.

"That was twenty minutes ago," he said. "I mistimed my entrance."

He went on quickly, seeing my confusion.

"Look. Just go and see my wife. All will come clear… in time."

He smiled at that, and was still smiling when he left, leaving three hundred pounds in new tenners on my desk. He walked out of the door. I was soon to find out that he had more than one way of leaving… but that was for later. For now, I was more than a little confused. I had no idea what I need to do to earn the money. But one thing was for sure… I needed more information before I went to see Mr. Laws' wife.

I had a feeling it might be a bad idea, but I headed for the University, and the Professor's office. His secretary was surprised when I told her I'd seen him that morning, and seemed on the verge of contradicting me, but thought better of it and directed me to his lab – an old Victorian cellar in the bowels of an even older building.

I felt like I'd been dropped in a Universal horror movie as I walked into a room where Van Der Graaf generators sparked and Tesla Coils hummed. The Professor himself was hunched over a desk, yet again scribbling furiously. He almost jumped out of his skin when I touched his shoulder.

"Who the hell are you? And what are you doing in my lab?"

"For a man who gave me three hundred quid only half an hour ago, you've got a short memory."

It was his turn to look at me in confusion.

"I've seen you prop up bars all over town," he said. "But I've got no idea who you are."

I was shown out unceremoniously. I went back to the office and looked at the money… money that came from a client that now disowned ever having given it to me. For a PI down on his luck it was like manna from heaven. I spent that night spending as much of it as I could before it disappeared in a puff of smoke. I tried thinking about time travel and paradoxes, but that just made my brain hurt, so I succumbed to the inevitable. Beer, curry and more beer led to a shaky walk home. I fell fully clothed into bed and slept the sleep of the just.

~-o0O0o-~

The next morning my conscience got the better of me. After two black coffees and three cigarettes I walked out to Kelvinbridge, heading for Laws' house. As I stood on the doorstep I had little idea what I was going to say – especially if Laws himself answered.

His wife opened the door and looked at me as if I was something she'd just stepped in. I struggled for an opening line and couldn't find one, so I settled for the truth.

"Apparently your husband and I will die if we don't kill you on Saturday afternoon," I said.

Now she thought *I* was the nut-job, but I could live with that if it got her talking. Unfortunately she didn't talk as much as rant, and I got the impression it came naturally to her. For the next two minutes she turned the air blue. She made it quite clear what she thought of me, her husband, and the world in general. She worked up quite the lather, and swore as impressively as anyone I'd heard. By the time she was done and slammed the door in my face *I* wanted to kill her.

Mr. Laws was waiting in the street beyond. I found him staring intently at his watch. It *was* a nice watch. I'd seen them in the higher-end shops, and hoped to be able to afford one of my own someday.

"She *has* to die," he said to me. "You see that, don't you? Meet me here on Saturday around two."

He didn't give me a chance to reply. He looked at his watch again, fiddled with the winder, pushed it firmly in… and *popped* out of existence.

My headache went up a notch, and even a walk along the riverside wouldn't shift it. I trudged back to the office and made the strongest pot of coffee I could manage, topping it up with a couple of fingers of Scotch. I'd just got started on it when I heard footsteps on the stairs.

Mr. Laws walked in. His hair was better combed than before, but

he had the same air of intensity.

"Derek Adams?" he asked. "That's your name?"

"You know it is," I said. "Did you forget about the three hundred again?"

"What three hundred?"

I sighed. The headache was drumming full force again. I sent some coffee and whisky to chase it around.

"Let me guess," I said. "We need to kill your wife on Saturday?"

He looked shocked.

"Why would I want to do that? I just came to thank you. Your visit to the lab told me that the machine *would* actually work. You've no idea what an effect that has on research. All I had to do was…"

I tuned him out. Two minutes of mathematical babble was ninety seconds too much for me. I stopped him with a question.

"And where… or rather, when, have you come from this time?"

He laughed.

"Tomorrow. I just thought you should know that it works. But what do you mean, this time?"

I wasn't about to open *that* can of worms if I could help it. And he wasn't in the mood to listen anyway. He looked at his watch.

"Got to go. I've got an appointment with my future."

He twiddled the winder, pushed it in, and *popped*.

That was it for me. I was done. I intended to drink the rest of the cash and let oblivion take me away for a while. But I wasn't given the time. I finished the coffee and started making inroads on the whisky when he *popped* back into existence in the chair opposite me.

"I'm going to come to you and tell you that we need to kill my wife," he said without preamble. "Please ignore me. You can keep the cash."

"You mean your wife doesn't need to die?"

He smiled grimly.

"Oh, she'll still die… on Saturday. It's just that I don't need your help any more."

He turned the winder, pushed it in, and was gone.

~-o0O0o-~

There was only one thing I knew for certain about that case, and that was that I was going to be at the Laws' house on Saturday, if only to make sure that *nobody* died.

There were several twists before then.

I was sitting at my desk minding my own business on Friday morning. I'd taken on a case involving a bookie, a horse and a newspaper man as a favour for George at the *Twa Dugs*, but nothing

was moving and I was gathering dust, just sitting and smoking, when he *popped* back into the chair. I nearly swallowed the Camel.

"Can you *please* stop doing that."

He didn't listen. He was even more unkempt, his hair standing up in clumps as if he'd been trying to pull it out. His eyes looked red and bloodshot and sunk in dark shadows.

"It's not what *I've* done that's the problem," he said. "You have no idea what *she's* done."

I sat back and tried to look nonchalant.

"How about you tell me?"

"No time," he said. "Just stay away on Saturday. Please?"

And once more, he *popped* off.

There was one more surprise appearance before everything went bad. It happened on Saturday morning, at ten o'clock. He arrived with a *pop* in the chair, screamed, "No, not again." He reached for the watch, but before he could reach the winder he *popped* away. In all it took perhaps two seconds. But it was long enough to give me an idea.

I made a detour to the City Centre on the way to the Laws' house, and had a short, if slightly confusing, chat with the owner. I got what I needed though, and had it in my pocket as I walked along the river to the house.

Mr. Laws was waiting for me outside the gate.

"We're clear. I've gone to the lab for the day and she's alone."

I tried to make sense of that sentence and failed.

"This time travel shit is messing with my brain," I said. "But I'm ready to go."

He showed me a handgun.

"This should do the trick."

I nodded, playing along. Everything now relied on me playing along. That, and one other thing.

"As you said… she has to die today. Shall we shake on it?"

He seemed surprised, but put out his hand. I grabbed it with both of mine. At the same time I jerked my head towards the house.

"What's that?"

It distracted him just long enough for me to make the switch. It went smoothly and he didn't notice.

"I'll take the back door," I said. "See you inside in a minute."

I intended to be back before then. I'd left him with a watch from the pawnbroker, and had taken his. My heart pounded and I felt slightly dizzy as I wound the time back two hours and pushed in the winder.

There was a slight sensation of *otherness* then I felt solid once more. I walked round the front. Mr. Laws wasn't there. I peered in the window. The clock had the same time as the watch on my wrist – two

hours earlier than it *should* be.

I had just enough time to put the whole plan in action. I made another trip to the pawnbroker, arriving at the same time as my earlier self. I tried not to look at myself as we talked. It is one thing looking in a mirror, but quite another finding your double standing shoulder to shoulder with you. Between the two of us we did just enough to convince Old Joe that the case was kosher. He demanded the whole story at a later date after I told him what I needed.

It only took him ten minutes – nobody knows clocks better than Old Joe does.

I took the watch, caught a cab back to the riverside house, got off early and crept through to the rear from the next door neighbour's garden. I looked round the side of the house just in time to see myself go *pop!*

From now on, it was all a matter of timing.

I knew I was far off the map on this one. I was winging it – making it up as I went along. I just hoped I could get Mrs. Laws to do her part. If I had thought longer about it I might have turned up half an hour earlier and explained the situation to her, but it was too late now for any more uses of the watch.

I slipped in the back door of the house. The sound of the television set came from the front. I walked through a quiet kitchen, heading towards the noise.

I was *almost* too late. The man was already there, the pistol pointing straight at his wife's midriff.

"I'm sorry Marion," he said. "But this has to be done."

To her credit she took it well. She put her hands on her hips and stared him out.

"Do I get a reason?"

"Do I really need another one?" he said and laughed. "I've been to the future. I didn't like what I saw there."

His finger tightened on the trigger.

"Stop," I said. I stepped forward. "Surely, just by being here, we've already changed that future?"

He stared at me.

"I didn't bring you along for a philosophy Q and A. Anyway, I know what I saw."

I stepped closer, hoping to get between the woman and the gun.

"But you can't know for sure. What harm is there in you taking another look… just in case?"

At that, Mrs. Laws did indeed play her part. She turned to me.

"Don't tell me you've bought into this time-travel bullshit?"

That got the man angry.

"You never did give me any credit," he said. "But you'll see. Just

watch this."

He twisted the winder of the watch at his wrist and pushed it in.

Nothing happened.

"I believe you need this one," I said, taking the other watch from my wrist.

He looked aghast.

"You haven't used it have you? What have you changed?"

I gave him my biggest smile.

"Wouldn't you like to know."

He showed me the gun again.

"I'm not afraid to use this."

I laughed at him.

"And how do you know that will achieve anything? You can either accept your fate, like the rest of us… or you can go and see for yourself."

He kept the gun on me as we swapped watches. He peered suspiciously at the one I gave him. I checked the time on the one he gave me.

Almost there.

He pointed the gun at his wife again. I saw in his eyes that he meant to pull the trigger, and to hell with the consequences.

"You don't want to do that," I said. "You never know what might happen."

He smiled.

"But that's the beauty of this," he said. "I have all the time in the world to find out."

He twisted the winder, pushed it in, and *popped* out of existence.

"What the hell just happened?" the wife said.

I waved her to silence and checked the watch.

It's time.

He came back with an audible *pop* and looked around, confused.

"What did you do?" he shouted, reaching for the winder. He never reached it. After exactly two seconds the winder whirred and snapped into position. Mr. Laws was staring straight at me, his eyes wide and his mouth open, as he *popped* away again.

As I said before, Old Joe knows a lot about clocks. In particular, he knows how to make them *jump*, sometimes hours, sometimes days, both forward and back. And it only takes two seconds for the spring to reset and do it all again.

~-o0O0o-~

I still see Mrs. Laws every so often. We meet, either in her house of my office, and discuss the nature of time, paradoxes, and just why

her husband thought she had to die. Mr. Laws sometimes makes an appearance at one location or the other, but he never contributes much to the conversation.

> Two seconds isn't a long time, and he uses most of it up screaming.

A Waste Disposal Problem

The Country of Silence is the lowermost of the Underground Fields in the Great Redoubt, a hundred miles deep in the world. Here I have plied my trade in peace and solitude for as long, and longer, than I can remember. This hundred miles square of garden bounds my existence and I have been content among the soft whispers of wind in the corn and the dancing of the blossoms of the poppy.

I have rarely given any thought to the doings of Lords in their tower so many miles above, thus it came as some surprise when Lord Marturioch descended to this level in the early part of my latest shift of duty and asked for me by name. I had to wait for his *bulb* to acclimatise before he was able to converse, and once he had done so I knew that my time of peace had, for a while at least, come to an end.

The tale he told me was one of large *Watchers* gathering in ever increasing numbers beyond the Redoubt. The Lords believe that the beasts are drawn by the waste products from our cultivations here in the fields even though great care is taken to see that such products are only released in the depths underneath even this, the bottommost level of the Redoubt. The *Watchers* presence has become enough of a nuisance to warrant action, and it seems that I am the tool which will be employed for the purpose.

Lord Marturioch has tasked me with improving the efficiency of our waste disposal by a factor of ten in the next two cycles. It is a great honor, but it is also a heavy burden, for the scale of the operation will be large indeed, and the burden of its success will fall on me and me alone.

I have much work ahead of me.

~-o0O0o-~

Failure.

I am in despair. Having spent the best part of a cycle in planning, preparation and execution it is bitter indeed to have so disappointed Lord Marturioch.

It started so well. I brewed the microbe in vast quantities, sufficient to the needs of breaking down the slurry that is normally despatched to the deep chasms. I meticulously worked out the entropic equations so that I knew, even down to the molecular level, where each calorie would be either created or consumed. The brewing alone took up several of the mile-wide vats that are usually allocated for beverages, and the Lord has told me that the accounting for their use will be taken from my allocation of resource for the next ten

cycles at least, which will sorely try the efficiency of my operations for the forseeable future.

But that is not the matter of most concern to me. My equations are sound. I have checked and double checked until I see the figures even unto my dreaming hours. There is nothing in my calculations to explain the population explosion of the microbes, nor how they could have swelled and foamed to so thouroughly block the shafts. I understand that the smell has been a great problem in the upper levels, and I have asked that my abject apologies be relayed throughout the Redoubt. I may never get over the embarrasment of this fiasco.

I have thought long and hard as to the cause of the microbes' growth. The only conclusion I can draw is that there is something about the *Earth Current* itself that is interacting with the electromagnetic properties of the organic tissue at a quantum level, interfering with the biochemistry in a manner that cannot be quantified with my current understanding of the processes.

This will require some further experimentation. Fortunately Lord Marturioch agrees with this assessment -- it seems that the *Watchers* problem is large enough to be causing concern, and I have been given leave to continue, even despite my very public failure.

I have resolved to start on a smaller scale for my next attempt. I have procured a small vat on this level, and have introduced the information matrix to the organic matter. Growth is proceding apace, and the first of my new *Harvesters* shall be ready anon.

Then the experiment will begin in earnest.

~-o0O0o-~

I have had a modicum of success, although to scale it up to the numbers required will prove a severe logistical challenge. I based my design for this prototype on a small omnivorous mammal that used to populate the planet in the Great Beyond before the Redoubt. It was infamous as a scavenger and cleaner, and my new *Harvesters* do indeed prove most adept at the task at hand, scurrying hither and tither in endless rows as they forage and digest slurry. Unfortunately they produce nearly as much waste product as they ingest, and the smell is noxious down here at the lower levels. I have taken great care that the toxic vapours do not reach more sensitive noses higher up, and am pleased at the small reduction in slurry I have achieved.

However, as aforementioned, to scale this success up would mean, of necessity, a huge explosion of the population of these small *Harvesters*. A quick calculation has me dejected again, as I have proved to my own satisfaction that I would have to create almost as much

biomass as I hope to eradicate in order for even the smallest of efficiency gains to be made. And given that my *Harvesters* show every sign of being curious about their environment, to the extent of escaping any bounds set for them and exploring the furthest reaches of this level, I fear I must scrap this initial batch and make a new effort with a somewhat less inquisitive creation.

Lord Marturioch has made it known to me that I am trying his patience, and that results will be required soon, as the *Watchers* are proving most burdensome and are showing increasing boldness. I neglected to tell the Lord of my theory that they might have been drawn closer by the latest fumes of my creation.

I do not think that would have been productive.

~-o0O0o-~

I am much happier with my latest creations. It has taken somewhat longer than anticipated due to having to spend time eradicating the *Harvester* population. My initial prototypes proved even more adept at escape and evasion than I anticipated, and almost as adept at procreation. Their population density did not become fully known for some time, as they are also cunning and hide in all available ducts and pipework. However I am confident that they have now been fully cleansed, and their biomass has been returned to the vats where the new, improved *Gardeners* are now reaching maturity.

These latest prototypes have been created with but one imperative; to find waste and cleanse it. Their metabolism is unique in that it converts the waste to water and methane. The water we shall be able to recycle, and the methane will be harvested and burned to provide extra heat for the cultivation of more crop. My own ingenuity has surprised me.

And that is not the only area in which I have used some creative thinking. My original *Harvesters* were just too small to cope with the amount of waste producted by a structure such as the Great Redoubt. These new *Gardeners* are much more robust beasts, their design based on another omnivore from the Great Beyond. The antecedent I used for the information matrix was bred as a food animal, but we have no such need here, so I was able to make several improvements to the matrix before introducing the organic material. My *Gardeners* will be able to go on two legs or four, and, having had much of their fat replaced by muscle, will be able to shift very large quantities of slurry at any one time. I have bred them as voracious eaters but, mindful of the mistakes made previously, I have on this occassion removed much of the intelligence that imbued my *Harvesters* with such enthusiasm.

The initial batch of two hundred cleared the square mile of

ground I allocated to them in short order indeed, and Lord Marturioch expressed his own confidence that the problem may at last be solved, and not before time, as the *Watchers* have been circling the Redoubt in even greater numbers in this most recent cycle.

Tomorrow we shall go into full production.

~-o0O0o-~

It seems I was premature in my celebration. It also seems I was over confident in my ability to remove all traces of intelligence and self-awareness from my *Gardeners*. The fact that this only became apparent after several thousands of the beasts had been released into the lower levels only makes matter worse. They have shown extreme curiousity and have fully explored their new habitat in a very short time. A group of fifty or more have been discovered several levels higher in the Redoubt, seemingly intent on reaching even higher still. In my further reading I have discovered that the antecedents on which I based my design much prefered to live under an open sky, and I fear that this is the imperative driving my creations.

My porcine creatures have also developed rudimentary communmication, despite such not being a part of the information matrix used in their development. I have reports of their *squealing* being heard all through the Redoubt, and I am afraid I have once more been the cause of much distress to the good citizens of the higher levels.

However things have not been a total failure. Waste reclamation is running at unprecedented efficiency, and Lord Marturioch has been impressed enough to give me sufficient leeway to get my creations under control. A team of fifty workers have started *herding* duties and I am confident that all *Gardeners* will be secure and brought back the lowest level in good time.

I certainly hope that is the case, as a fresh batch of the beasts is even now coming to maturity in the vats, and I am loath to send them back to basic materials without any pressing reason.

~-o0O0o-~

Calamity has been averted.

My *herding* teams failed to pick up a small group of *Gardeners* and the inquisitive beasts managed to reach the upper levels of the Redoubt before their flat-faced features were finally spotted and an alarm was raised. However by the time I could send aid, the beasts had already opened an exterior door and made their way outside.

It was at this point that Lord Marturioch informed me that I was

to be relieved of my duties, an order that was thankfully rescinded when the *Gardeners'* effect on the *Watchers* was seen.

A large *Watcher* had encroached close to the *Barrier*. *When the Gardeners* saw it, they immediately headed straight in that direction, and in frenzied attacks, tried to breach the barrier. I immediately saw what was happening. They viewed the *Watcher* as a waste product, and seemed intent on cleansing the Earth of it.

I told the Lord of my theory. At first he refused to believe me, as I had so recently, and on several occassions, disappointed him. But even as I tried to persuade him, it was obvious that the *Gardeners* would destroy themselves if necessary in their frenzied attempt to reach the *Watcher*.

In the end, he relented. And he was *most* impressed with the result when we lowered the barrier just enough to let the *Gardeners* at the *Watcher*.

They reduced it to little more than water and methane in a very short time.

The Lord has asked me to halt production on the latest batch of *Gardeners*, but only until we can give them one extra imperative that we will implant just before sending them outside the barrier. I am rather pleased with it, as it is simple but elegant.

I found it in an old database entry, and I am implanting it in the information matrix now.

Go forth and multiply.

At the Trial of the Loathsome Slime

The slime was truly ugly, the ugliest thing ever seen on Earth, uglier even than a bowl of rhubarb and custard left to congeal for a few days then coated with chocolate sauce, which it resembled most.

That afternoon it was held in a box of clear plastic, a six foot cube against whose walls it slithered and splattered with dismaying regularity. The trails of yellow mucous left behind when it retracted boiled violently before finally hardening into brown crayons etched on the inside walls. It had been calculated that the plastic would last fifteen minutes, more than enough for the court to reach a verdict.

Scenes were flashed across the holo-vid in heart-stopping sharpness: the return of the deep space probe, the sudden growth of jelly on its surface as the slime discovered it liked oxygen, the slime escaping from the research lab by the simple expedient of melting its way through everything in its path, the slime snuggling up to a dog and devouring half of it before moving on, the slime melting its way into and through a the servo-motors of a cross-town aero-bus, and, finally, the high point of the prosecutor's case, the slime pouring over the Multivac port, the casing and chips and melted copper fusing into a blob before themselves being consumed. The camera drew back to show the slime sitting contentedly at an intersection, small pustules bubbling on what passed for it's skin.

The jury gave a long sign as the prosecutor rumbled back to the niche with the parting words, "The prosecution rests, M'Lord."

The room was hushed, a quiet broken only by the splashing of new ridges on the walls of the slime's cage.

An aperture opened beside the vocalizer and a black rectangle of cloth was placed on top of a weary grey wig.

The vocalizer adopted a stern bass register as it intoned the verdict. This menace to Earth's security was to be destroyed. Analysis had shown that only by breaking the slime into its constituent cells could its effects be neutralised.

Therefore the court judged that the slime was to be taken from the courtroom to the Virginia Mountains on the planet Blue Ridge, where it would be poured through a micropore sieve until it was dead.

"And may Multivac have mercy on its circuits."

There was no one present at the demise of the slime, which was a pity, because proof of its great intelligence emerged at the last second as its cells communicated with each other in one last message in an attempt to cheer itself up on the way to oblivion…

"Well! This is another fine mesh you've gotten us into."

The Watcher in the Dunes

I watched her as she watched the film. The lights danced in her eyes and her knuckles were white where she gripped my hand. I could feel her fingernails dig into my palms as I studied the colours which flickered and faded across her face.

She was well into it, her tongue peeking between her lips in concentration. I never could see the attraction of scaring yourself half to death and found the images on the film more sickening then frightening. It certainly hyped her up though - I could almost feel the thud of her heart as the film reached its climax and the red wash of blood seemed to splash across the audience.

I turned towards her and had to suppress a gasp - her face was a red, featureless mass. But only for a second. Eventually, after interminable mayhem and bloodshed, the credits rolled and the lights went up. The crowd began to filter out but she sat, eyes glued to the screen as the lists of key-grips, best boys and wardrobe assistants scrolled by. It was only when the music had finally stopped and the curtain came down that she began to move, slowly, like someone coming out of a dream.

"Thanks for bringing me," she said, as she leaned forward to kiss my cheek and I felt her tongue slide wetly across my skin. She took my hand as we walked up the aisle and her arm draped around my waist as we reached the street. We huddled together for warmth as the chill night wind whipped around us, throwing the usual Saturday night rubbish into the air to whirl and clatter among the shops.

We hurried through the dark to the car and I listened to her chattering the whole way, talk of bloody murder, of throat clenching, heart stopping terror, all of life's fears reduced to several thousand frames of celluloid, the modern day opium of the masses.

I was feeling cynical. Six months we had been seeing each other, and every night out ended the same way - a quick grope in the doorway of her flat, just enough to leave me hot and frustrated, then I was left with the closed door and the lingering taste of her lipstick.

The way things were going I didn't think tonight was going to be any different. She was still off in a world of her own, one where banshees shrieked and witches danced in the moonlight and, even as we got in the car she was telling me all about one particular scene in the film, as if she alone had seen it.

"There was blood everywhere, great globules of it, as if someone had been careless with a bottle of tomato ketchup. And he was till walking around, bits of his brains showing and his guts hanging out. And…"

I tuned her out. Maybe it was time to move on - I seemed to

have discovered her passion, one I wasn't able to share. I had underestimated the power of that passion though. She was quiet for the rest of the journey, and I thought she was thinking about the film, but she was to prove me wrong.

We came down to the beach to watch the moon. When I was a kid the beach was undeveloped - the marina hadn't been built and the road to the bay was little more than a dirt track.

"Do you love me?" she asked.

"Of course I love you," I said, and in a way I'd loved her since I first saw her, up there on the stage. She had the body of an angel and the voice of a screeching demon - two parts Joplin, one part Bardot - Bardot in her prime.

Her voice spoke to me - of love found then tragically lost - of the dark beauty of suffering, the ultimate teenage dream.

"Have you got a blanket in the car?" she asked, and my heart did a fast drum roll as I realised what she was asking. I managed to nod, my throat to dry to speak.

"Well, go fetch, boy," she said. "This is your lucky night…and bring a flashlight if you've got one. It's dark down there."

I managed to get the boot open at the third attempt - my hands were shaking so much that I dropped the key in the sand and for a terrible moment I couldn't find it in the dark, but then my fingers found the warm metal and I knew that everything was going to be perfect.

My palms were sticky with anticipation.

I managed to find the blanket and torch, then closed the boot. I could see that she was already making her way down to the shore.

I left the car up there, behind the dunes. The moonlight danced across the water and the only sound was the polite rattle of pebbles being pulled in by the surf.

At first I couldn't see her, but then I caught a faster dancing amongst the ripples as her head broke the surface.

She started swimming towards me - a smooth, confident breast-stroke which sent the reflected moonbeams whirling into a maniac frenzy. I didn't have much time to get myself ready and I only just managed to get the blanket laid out flat when she grabbed me from behind.

I turned into a warm, wet embrace that smelled of salt and freshness and exuberant life. Our clothes seemed to fall off us of their own accord and soon we had tumbled together onto the blanket in a mass of flailing arms and legs. I had to ask the question.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" I held my breath as I waited for her reply.

She put a wet finger over my lips.

“Shush,” was all she said before she pulled me down to the blanket. Her skin cool and smooth under my fingers as I pulled off her wet T-shirt and rubbed my knuckles over her nipples, causing them to stand to attention. She moaned as I ran my hands down to her waist and she pulled me close.

This was it - I was finally going to get there. I thought my knees weren’t going to hold me as I leant over her. Her lips parted moistly and her eyes shone in the moonlight as I lowered myself unto her.

And that’s when it happened…

There was a low moan from the dunes behind us, a moan that didn’t sound quite human, but didn’t sound like any animal I’d ever heard either.

She froze underneath me, and she pushed me off her.

“What was that?”

“Just the wind,” I said. I didn’t believe it, but my hormones weren’t going to let her go that easily.

I tried to hold her but she pushed me away.

“There’s a pervert up there watching us,” she whispered, pulling her T-shirt over her head.

“Oh, come on Linda. Who’s going to come way out here and freeze just to watch us?”

Just as I reached for her the moan came again, causing her to back away from me.

“See - I told you.”

I tried to make a grab for her again, one last attempt to appease the trouser snake.

She backed away, saying, “I’m not going to be somebody’s show-time.” And, before I could stop her she was heading for the dunes, moving fast even over the soft sand. I stopped long enough to pull on my denims.

When I finally caught up with her she was standing in front of a black hole in the dune, the sand still crumbling away from its sides. Just inside the hole it was possible to see the damp glistening black of exposed stonework.

She turned to look at me, eyes wide and staring, just as another moan rent the air. I was hit by a burst of dry air, air which smelled old and stale, and the dry grasses around the hole whispered in sympathy.

“Like I said, it’s just the wind,” I said.

But she wasn’t listening.

“Do you know what this is?” she said, going on before I had time to reply, “it’s one of those buried buildings - you know - like Skara Brae in Orkney. There could be a warren of them in there.”

I had no idea what she was talking about, and I had a feeling I didn’t want to know. I tried to pull her away but she was having none

of it. And then she said the words I'd been dreading.

"Get the torch - I want to see what's inside."

I tried to argue with her, but the look in her eyes brooked no discussion - I got the torch.

When I got back she was bent over the hole, trying to peer into the depths.

"Listen," she said, putting a warm finger to my lips.

The air rushed out of the hole once more, still hot, still dry, then it suddenly stopped. There was a short pause and then there was a draught again, but this time slowing inwards, rustling the grass and causing small pebbles to tumble from around the hole's rim. It was exactly as if the hole was breathing.

"Give me the torch," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "This is going to be amazing."

She took the light and, gingerly at first, began to go down into the hole, having to stoop to get past the crumbling entrance.

She only turned back once after she had got herself inside, looking out from the blackness, the torch lighting her face like a crazy Halloween mask.

"Come on then. You're not going to like me go in there all by myself are you?"

Her tone was teasing and once more playful. A weight shifted in my stomach and I believed that once more everything was going to be okay - we'd fumble around in the dark for a bit, then I could get her out onto the beach and take up where we'd left off.

I didn't want to go, but I followed her down feeling the air rush past my ears as I descended, air that was being pulled into the hole.

I couldn't see much in the blackness, only the too bright beam of the torch as it occasionally lit the wall ahead of me and the dark silhouette that filled the corridor below me. Soon the noise of the sea receded and we went down into the darkness in silence.

At one point I ran my hand across the wall on my left but it came away cold and slimy. The air got warmer as we descended and I began to have trouble breathing. I was about to suggest that we turn back when we stepped into a bigger chamber and Linda's voice echoed around in whispers. I couldn't quite make out what she said - my heart was suddenly thumping loudly, the blood rushing hotly inside my ears. I wanted to run, but Linda had the torch, and there was no way I was going back up that corridor in the dark.

"Come here," a voice said in my left ear, a voice that seemed to come from within the wall. I turned to see Linda motioning me towards a black-shadowed alcove in the corner.

It was a fireplace, but far older than any I had ever seen. The hearthstone was one huge, roughly cut block, a black dense stone that

I had never seen before. Slimy condensation ran over its surface in a thin film that gleamed like oil in the torch light.

Thick grey lichens hung like whiskers from its underside, wafting slightly in the breeze, but what Linda really wanted me to look at was lying within the shadows, almost obscured by ashes.

It had once been a person - that was my first thought, before I realised that there were too many bones, too many fingers. There were two of them, and they had died huddled together under the hearth stone, two people crammed into a space scarcely big enough for one. Their bones seemed to have melted and fused together, joining them at the breast-bone in one final, deadly embrace.

There was only one skull visible, its eye sockets staring blackly out of the ashes, its jaws hanging open in one last scream.

Linda bent forward for a closer look, placing her hand on the black stone for balance. I saw the wetness glide over her fingers, rainbow colours flowing across its oily surface then seeming to melt into her hand.

“I wonder how old they are?” she said, leaning further forward as if to touch the bones. I pulled her back, suddenly angry.

“Leave them be,” I said, the echoes hissing back at me. “These are dead people for Christ’s sake.”

At first I thought she was going to hit me, the rage in her eyes causing me to step backwards, but then her look softened and she reached out to touch my arm.

“You’re scared, aren’t you?” she said. “This place is getting to you.” She had a mocking grin on her face and I could feel my erection growing as she ran a cool hand over my cheek.

She noticed it as well and her hand moved downwards, caressing the front of my shirt, flicking at the buttons before landing gently on my crotch.

“Do you love me?” she asked.

I heard the rasp as she unzipped me and I gasped as she teased my growing member out from its confines.

“Not here,” I whispered. “Please, not here.”

She ignored my pleas and started to stroke, and while she worked, she began to sing. Her voice rose until the walls were reverberating in time with the rhythm. I didn’t recognise the words, but the tune was old and it spoke to me of a hard life lived by the sea, of fish and gulls and wind and waves.

She began to push me back until I felt the cold wall press against my spine. Again I tried to force her away but she only got more insistent, her hold on my prick getting ever tighter until it felt like she was trying to pull it out by the root. I grabbed at her arm and tried to pull it away but it brought more pain as she tugged harder. She

looked into my eyes and, way down behind her pupils, rainbow lights danced.

I think I screamed, more in anger than in fear, and I pushed her, hard, right into her ribs. She didn't stop singing as she fell backwards. Maybe the voice wasn't hers. The torch hit the ground first and went out, but I will never forget the sharp crack as the back of her head hit something hard.

I had a bad couple of seconds when I couldn't find the torch, and an even worse time when I thought it wasn't going to work, but finally its yellow flare lit the room and I was able to see what had happened to Linda.

She had landed in the ashes of the old fire, and at first I could see no sign of injury. I was crying as I bent over her face and shone the torch in her eyes, but there was no answering light there, only the dark grey stare of the dead. As if to escape the light her head turned away from me, and then I saw it - the long, pointed bone which had made its way into her brain, just below the ear.

The gorge rose in my throat and I turned away, retching, feeling my last meal come up hot and heavy. It was as I turned back that I heard the noise, the moistness of something slipping through flesh. I thought Linda was still alive and I turned to touch her, just in time to see the bone disappear completely into her neck.

There was a rustling and the hard dissonant cracking as the dead bones in the grate began to move and heavy drops of rainbow-suffused oil dripped from the black stone. I could only stand and watch, stuck to the spot in terror.

A long rib slipped itself into her left eye, taking it out with a soft, mucoid plop, the whole ten inch length of it sliding seamlessly into her head.

A femur rose from the pile, swaying in the air like a charmed cobra before plunging between her legs, its knurled knob pushing her open and forcing its way in - no finesse, no subtlety. I saw the bulge move in her stomach as it forced its way further inside. Small, misshapen fingers roamed her exposed midriff, clacking their happy way over her cooling skin until they found her navel - not much of an opening, but enough. I had to close my eyes as the flesh of her stomach split.

When I next looked the skull was sitting between her breasts, her T-shirt having been pushed up to her armpits. It seemed to smile at me as it rolled forward, face down into the spreading gore of her trunk. It immediately started to chew, great globs of red, glistening meat being torn into strips which were left in a growing pile behind it as it started to burrow.

Five more ribs pushed into her side, sliding into her as one, as if

synchronised. I closed my eyes again and, in that darkness, I tried not to hear the moist suckings, the cracking of long dead and recently dead bones, tried not to notice the hot, fetid coppery taste of blood in the back of my throat.

I could feel hot tears run down my face, but they didn't seem to belong to me - I wasn't feeling much of anything apart from a cold numbness that threatened to engulf me and send me down into blackness for a long time.

A moan brought me out of it.

'God - she can't still be alive!' was my thought as I opened my eyes. I was right - she wasn't alive. But something else was.

The bloated, stretching figure on the hearth had once looked like Linda, but no more. The skin looked tight enough to tear at any moment and small hard edges ran like waves beneath its surface. I couldn't bare the sight of the blood and carnage in her midriff and moved the torch upwards. Her face had been stretched into a vast 'pumpkin-head' that glistened redly in the torchlight which wiggled and danced in the light.

And then there was another moan, just before her mouth opened and the twin rows of red teeth smiled at me.

A rainbow aura issued from her mouth, spilling thickly over her neck and chest, sluggish and slow, but wherever it passed it brought bones to the surface.

Old bones and new bones, broken bones and whole bones, all fusing and running together as if boiled in acid. There was a chanting in the air - and I couldn't tell if it was coming from the body or whether it was in my head.

"Ig nyarlthotep ryleh f'tangh"

"Ia log Sototh"

"Ia C'thulhu."

And it was answered from some deep unknown chamber beneath, a roar that shook the stone around me and set fine sand dancing in the air.

"Tekeli Li"

"Tekeli Li."

The earth buckled under my feet, causing me to stumble, and the movement got my legs working again. I headed for the entrance as the stonework began to crumble around me and the thing that used to be Linda followed. I only looked back once… And I wish I hadn't.

The corridor was much to narrow to allow it passage, but it was pushing itself through, the cracking of bones breaking insufferably loud in the confined space. Small ragged shards punched through the taut flesh, bringing tiny eruptions of blood and gore. And still it came on, and still the bones broke.

I ht the outside at a run and turned back to the hole, kicking sand and earth and grasses down on the lumbering thing below me. The chanting began again, a deep throaty thing, a noise which sent a flock of seagulls cawing in fright overhead.

I grabbed the lintel stone and, with all my weight, pulled hard on it, but it refused to budge. I was about to try again when something cold and hard grabbed my left ankle and the chanting rose to a triumphant roar.

A cold hand began to climb my leg, tugging, ever harder, and all that stopped me falling down to join it in that charnel pit was my hold on the lintel. I screamed in rage and pain and dug my fingers into the stone as the grip on my leg tightened.

With all my strength I tugged on the lintel as the hand reached my upper thigh. Then, suddenly, the stone began to give. I pulled harder and it came down away from the dine, taking the entrance way, the creature, and me down in a hail of fine sand.

I landed hard, my left leg under the edge of the stone. When I tried to move my leg flared in pain but I managed finally to force it out from under the stone. As I did so I thought I heard a cry of frustration from far below.

I wasn't able to stand, but I could move enough to tumble the remaining rocks over the remains of the entrance and to cover the hole with sand before crawling back to the car.

I spent two weeks in hospital as they tried to save my leg, but they didn't quite manage it. I'm not bitter - I got off lightly.

At nights, at this time of year, I come down here to sit and listen. Every year the sea eats into the dune a bit more and every year I wonder if this will be the one.

And on quiet nights she sings again - just for me.

A Slim Chance

I smoked too many cigarettes, sipped too much Highland Park and let Bessie Smith tell me just how bad men were. For once thin afternoon sun shone on Glasgow; the last traces of winter just a distant memory. Old Joe started up "Just One Cornetto" in the shop downstairs. I didn't have a case, and I didn't care.

All was right with the world.

I should have known it was too good to last.

I heard him coming up the stairs. Sherlock Holmes could have told you his height, weight, shoe-size and nationality from the noise he made. All I knew was that he was either ill or very old; he'd taken the stairs like he was climbing a mountain with a Sherpa on his back.

He rapped on the outside door.

Shave and a haircut, two bits.

"Come in. Adams Massage Services is open for business."

At first I thought it was someone wandering in off the street. He was unkempt, unshaven, eyes red and bleary. He wore an old brown wool suit over a long, out of shape cardigan and his hair stood out from his scalp in strange clumps. I've rarely seen a man more in need of a drink.

Or a meal.

He was so thin as to be almost skeletal, the skin on his face stretched tight across his cheeks. I was worried that if I made him smile his face might split open like an over-ripe fruit.

"Are you Adams?" he said as he came in. He turned out to be younger than I'd first taken him for, somewhere in his thirties at a guess, but his mileage was much higher. "George at the Twa Dugs said you might be able to help me."

I waved him in.

"It's about time George started calling in some of the favors I owe him. Sit down Mr…?"

"Duncan. Ian Duncan."

He sat, perched at the front of the chair, as if afraid to relax. His eyes flickered around the room, never staying long on anything, never looking straight at me.

"Smoke?" I asked, offering him the packet.

He shook his head.

"It might kill me," he said.

I lit up anyway… a smell wafted from the man, a thick oily tang so strong that even the pungent Camels didn't help much.

Time for business.

"So what can I do for you Mr. Duncan?"

“I’m being terrorized,” he said. “I need you to make it stop.”

I stared back at him.

“Sounds like a job for the Polis to me,” I said.

He laughed, making it sound like a sob. He took a bundle of fifty pound notes from his pocket and slapped them on the table. I tried not to salivate.

“No. This is no job for the terminally narrow-minded,” he said. “I need somebody with a certain kind of experience. *Your* kind of experience.”

Somebody put a cold brick in my stomach, and I had a sudden urge to stick my fingers in my ears. I got the whisky out of the drawer. I offered him one. He shook his head, but his eyes didn’t stray from the bottle. I poured his measure into a glass alongside my own and sent them chasing after each other before speaking.

“And exactly what kind of experience do I need to help you?”

A good storyteller practices his tale. At first, when he tells the story, he sounds like your dad ruining his favorite dinner table joke for the hundredth time.

Oh wait... did I tell you the horse had a pig with him?

But gradually he begins to understand the rhythm of the story, and how it depends on knowing all the little details, even the ones that no one ever sees or hears. He knows what color of trousers he was wearing the day the story took place, he knows that the police dog had a bad leg, he knows that the toilet block smelled of piss and shit. He has the sense of place so firmly in his mind that even he almost believes he's been there. Once he’s done all that, he tells the killer story, complete with unexpected punch line.

Then there’s the Ian Duncan method… scatter information about like confetti and hope that somebody can put enough of it together to figure out what had happened to who.

I raised an eyebrow, and that was enough to at least get him started.

“It was four months ago. There were six of us then, and it started as a dare. One of those *Comic Relief* shows was coming up, and we decided to go on a diet for charity. That first week we lost six pounds between us… at least, the five guys did. Wee Annie Gardner struggled though. She just couldn’t take to the exercise and…”

I coughed politely.

“Is there a point to this Mr. Duncan?”

“I need you for protection,” he said quietly. “Protection against what’s after me.”

It was my turn to sigh.

“And just what *is* after you?” I asked. “Some big dog? Or a Glesga heavy with an axe maybe?”

The fear lay big in his eyes.

"It's worse," he said. "Much worse. Three of my friends died recently. And I might be next," he said."

"Tell me," I said softly.

He started to cry in that *holding-it-all-in* way kids do when they're trying to be brave. His shoulders heaved and tears ran down his cheeks. Then he *really* frightened me. He started to wheeze, struggling for air. He doubled over and broke into a coughing fit so strong I thought his lungs might come up.

I poured a glass of whisky and held it out to him, having to place it in his shaking hand.

He downed it in one. The coughing stopped. But the fear was back in his eyes as he stared at the glass.

"I thought it was water," he whispered.

Something stronger than just the wind rattled my window behind me.

"Please? I thought it was water," he shouted. He got out of the chair so fast that it fell with a *bang* on the floor.

I stood, unsure as to what to do next.

I wasn't given an option. The window behind me blew in with a crash and a spatter of glass. I felt something grab me at the back of the neck, and my head was thrust down, hard, against the side of the desk. The corner caught me near the right eye. Blood spurted as I fell away.

Duncan screamed.

I tried to wipe my eyes clear. I was partly blinded by blood in one eye, and my sight was blurred but I could make out enough to know that something large and white crouched over the man.

What the hell is that?

Duncan stopped screaming and went quiet. The only sound was a moist *sucking* like a wet fart. I wanted to stand up straight but my head had other ideas and the room span until I steadied myself with a hand on my desk.

Now even the sucking noise had stopped.

I looked up as the out-of-focus white thing bounded off Duncan and came towards me. I just had time to duck as it leaped over the desk like a pony taking a jump. By the time I'd turned it had gone out the window. My sight cleared… enough that I was able to pick my way through the shards of glass on my way to the window. I looked out, but there was only the usual Glasgow skyline.

Duncan lay still on the floor. I staggered to his side. His eyes stared up at me from a face that had dried out like an old raisin left in the sun.

He was dead and already going cold.

I lifted the money from the desk and, closing the door quietly behind me, went to work.

~-o0O0o-~

My first stop was the Twa Dugs. I told George what I needed and he gave me an elastoplast, a beer and his promise that he'd get the mess cleared up.

"How did he find you?" I asked George as I sipped at the beer. The urge was to knock it down and get started on the next, but Duncan had laid his money down. That bought him my attention, for a while at least.

George shrugged.

"How does anybody find me? You ken what this town is like."

I knew only too well.

Everybody knows everything when there's money involved and nothing when there's Polis in the frame.

I thanked George for the beer and headed for the Mitchell library.

I thought I'd had a headache to start with, but two hours at the microfiche taught me the real meaning of the word. But I found what I was looking for. Anne Gardner, 31, from Clarkston, was found dead in her flat on the twenty-second of February. The cause of death was listed as starvation but the Procurator Fiscal had delivered an open verdict… she'd been perfectly fit and healthy the night before, and had been seen tucking into a few beers and a curry in a restaurant off Sauchiehall Street. I found out more than I needed to know about her from the tabloid reports of her death, but I also found out where she had worked.

The office was in the old Merchant area in the town center. Not that many years ago this had been a place of dark dank tenements with hookers on the corners and winos in the alleys. Now it stood as a shining market of consumerism with Italian clothes shops, coffee bars and chrome and glass offices for people in expensive suits.

At this time of night it was mostly shut and locked down. What the suits didn't know was that the winos and hookers hadn't gone. They'd just changed their shift patterns. Down in the alleys at night the waste from the rich became the tit-bits of the poor as scavengers raked over the detritus of the day.

Nothing really changes.

The security guard at Carnegie Towers wasn't keen on me until I showed him the quarter bottle of whisky I kept in my coat for such occasions. That loosened his tongue, and a fifty from Duncan's pile made sure it stayed that way.

“I didnae ken the Gardner lassie,” he said. “But I was there the nicht the other two got deid.”

I handed him the bottle and let him talk.

“Everybody knew about the diet team,” he said. “They were making fools o’ themselves in the wee gym downstairs every night. Thirty and forty year old men trying to be boys again, and failing. The lass dying put a wee bit of a dampner on them for a while, but a couple of weeks later they were back at it as bad as ever.

“The night it happened two of them were down there, each trying to lift heavier weights than the other. The three of us were the only ones in the building and I was jist waiting for them to go before I could lock up and have a kip. They buggered that idea when they came straight out the shower and ordered fish suppers. They gave me a tenner to go get them and told me to keep the change but I was still pissed off later when they called down from the office.

“They wanted me to go up and get rid of a big white cat that was pestering them. I told them to fucking catch it for themselves.

“I didna hear a peep out of them after that.

“When I did my rounds at ten o’clock I found them baith, face down in their supper. The doctors said they’d starved. But whit dae doctors know? Everybody kens ye cannae starve while eating a fish supper. It’s jist no’ natural.”

~-o0O0o-~

That seemed to be the sum total of his knowledge. I didn’t know yet how it helped me, but my *spidey* sense was tingling.

The game was afoot.

I did get something else of interest… I got the last known addresses of the remaining three dieters. It had been a while since any of them had been seen at work, but the guard didn’t seem too concerned.

“Yon Duncan man was here longer than the others. But everybody was glad when he called to say he wasn’t coming back. He was getting too skinny anyway,” he said as I left him with the last of the booze. “He was scary.”

I already knew where Duncan had ended up. That just left the last two… Peter Clarke and David Ellison. Both had addresses out in Milngavie… too far for a trip at this time of the night. The pounding in my head had lessened, but it hadn’t gone away, and the small amount of whisky I’d taken from the quarter bottle had just got me started.

I *should* have headed back to the office and the bed in the back room. But all that waited there for me was Duncan’s dead eyes. They’d

still be there, even if George had cleaned up the mess. I needed a drink before I'd be prepared to face it. I wandered down towards Central Station, found a bar that had avoided gentrification, and settled in.

I have little memory of the next few hours. I drank, I talked to strangers, and I drank some more. I drank until my head stopped pounding and I couldn't see Ian Duncan's eyes.

Some time later I slept.

I dreamed of white cats and fish suppers.

~-o0O0o-~

When I woke it was morning, and I was sitting on a bench in Buchanan Street Bus Station. My mouth felt like somebody had shat in it. I took a taxi back to the office and climbed the stairs as wearily as Duncan had managed the day before.

George at the Twa Dugs had been as good as his word. There was no dead body on the floor, and the window was fixed. The room smelled of putty. I sent some cigarette smoke to join it before showering and shaving.

After two cups of coffee I started to feel almost human. The weight of Duncan's money started once again to prey on my conscience. I lit up a new Camel, pulled the phone towards me and went back to work.

Clarke and Ellison weren't hard to find in the book, but Clarke wasn't answering the phone, and I got the answering machine at Ellison's place. I wasn't doing anyone any good by sitting in the office, so I left a message for Ellison telling him I was on the way and headed for Milngavie.

It had just started to rain so I hailed a cab. He wasn't keen on going so far out of the city, but the sight of my money shut him up fast. We headed along Great Western Road past Anniesland, and the traffic lessened as we left the city behind.

This far out Glasgow becomes suburbia. Neat houses with neat cars outside and neat little people inside, living neat, tidy lives of clockwork regularity.

For people out here, the Glasgow I knew was a foreign country. They visited it during their working hours, but they only saw what was on the surface, what the city let them see. They didn't remember that all around them was a dark, old lady, brooding and cold. She mostly let herself show at nights, in the bars, around the docklands, and in the vast cemeteries which marked where all her children lay sleeping.

Some of them might occasionally catch a glimpse of her, in the

face of a drunk, in the hands of a beggar. But they'd soon forget her once safely home and locked into their havens with their soap operas and reality shows and their TV dinners and boxes of Australian wine.

I was never allowed to forget her.

And I don't want to.

The cab dropped me off in a cul-de-sac of houses that all looked the same… perfectly groomed, perfectly dull. Curtains twitched as I walked up the drive to Ellison's place. A trim woman in a nurse's uniform answered the door.

"I knew the suburbs were kinky," I said. "But isn't this taking it a bit far?"

I didn't even get a smile.

"If you're here to see Mr. Ellison, he's resting, and can't be disturbed."

"He's expecting me."

She looked me up and down.

"He's expecting a private detective, not somebody who smells like a brewery and looks like he's slept in one.

"I left a message…" I said.

She sighed loudly and rolled her eyes. She looked kind of cute, but not enough for me to cut her any slack. I stared at her until she relented.

"He got it," she finally said. "He said I was to show you in."

She stood aside, but only just, and the look she gave me told me *just* what she thought of the idea. She motioned me through to a front room that had been turned into a room to care for a *very* sick man.

Ellison lay on a bed that looked far too big for him. He reminded me of the children you see in pictures of African famines; distended belly pushing through hospital whites, arms like thin sticks, lips pale, drawn back from gray gums showing yellowed, tombstone teeth.

"He wont let me put in a drip," she said. "Won't let me feed him. All he has is water."

"How long has he got?"

She shrugged. She looked like she was past caring.

"By rights he should be dead already."

One of the stick-like arms rose and waved me forward. I had to lean over close to hear him, and even then his voice barely rose above a whisper.

"Tell Clarke I don't forgive him," he said.

"For what?"

He coughed and spluttered, thin spots of blood splattering the white of his covers.

"It was Clarke's idea in the first place," he said. "Him and that fucking binding agreement he made us sign."

The man laughed bitterly, and I realized that he was hardly more than thirty years old. He looked at least eighty.

"It was binding all right. And now there's just the two of us left. Well you can tell Clarke that I might be dying… but I'll see him go to hell first."

He started to laugh and cackle and I realized something else… the poor bugger was mad as a bag of rabid monkeys. More blood spattered, The nurse ushered me aside as the coughing fit got worse and some of the machines he was wired to started to beep faster.

At the back of the room French doors opened out into the garden. I went out and lit up a smoke.

The case was getting to me. I hadn't learned anything I liked, and little that would lead me to the root of what was going on. Meanwhile everybody involved was heading south fast.

The nurse came out five minutes later and bummed a cigarette from me.

"How's the patient?" I asked as I lit her up.

She sucked a lung-full before replying.

"He coughed himself unconscious," she said. "He won't last but a few more days. Maybe a wee bit more now that I've put a drip in… he cannae complain when he's out for the count."

And just like that everything came together… Duncan drinking my whisky, Wee Annie eating a curry, the two men wolfing down fish suppers. Somebody… or something, didn't want any breaking of the diet.

Binding agreement.

That's what Ellison had said. It looked like it had been more binding than any of them had anticipated.

I turned back into the room.

"You have to take the drip out," I said.

"I don't *have* to do anything."

We weren't given time to get into an argument. The front window blew in with a crash and something that looked like a shaved albino chimpanzee bounded inside. I was halfway to the bed already, but I was too late. It latched its mouth on Ellison's face and *sucked.*

The sound of Ellison's life draining away made my guts roil. I stepped forward and punched at the hunched figure sat on the man's chest. My hand seemed to sink into it. It felt like hitting a slab of warm butter.

The moist sucking stopped. The beast raised its mouth from the dry husk that had once been David Ellison. It turned towards me.

There was no face.

But it saw me, just the same.

A wet, oily mouth opened, no more than a slit in that formless

visage. I aimed another punch, but met only air as the beast leaped out of the broken window. I had a last glimpse of white as it jumped through the shrubbery then it was gone.

~-o0O0o-~

The nurse stood at the garden door, cigarette dangling from her fingers, mouth opening and closing like a drowning goldfish.

"I thought he was hallucinating," she whispered. "A big white dug he said it was. I didnae believe him."

I took the cigarette from her before she burned her fingers.

"His pal, Peter Clarke. Does he live round here?"

She couldn't take her eyes from the dried out *thing* on the bed.

'I thought he was addled," she said softly. She was on the verge of going into shock, but I didn't have time to play nice. I slapped her cheek until I got her attention. It took a while.

Finally her eyes fixed on mine.

"Clarke," I said. "Does he live round here?"

"Acacia Avenue," she said. "Two lefts then a right, number 45."

I was on my way out of the door before she remembered to be outraged.

"Hey. You hit me. I've a good mind to…"

I didn't hear any more. I ran along the suburban streets, hoping like hell I would make it on time.

~-o0O0o-~

45 Acacia Avenue wasn't quite like the other houses on the street. The lawn hadn't been mown for months, and fast food cartons lay strewn the length of the drive alongside torn rubbish bags spilling their contents to the wind.

But it was the front door that gave away the fact that I'd left suburbia behind. It was covered in intricate drawings done in black charcoal; swirls and curlices around pentagrams and hexagrams. I'd seen something like it before, during research on another case that had taken a dive into the twilight zone. But this looked less like a formal magic protection ritual and more like a man trying as many symbols as he could, in the hope that at least one might work.

I knocked hard on the door.

Somebody moved inside, but they didn't answer.

"Mr. Clarke? I know about the diet… and the *Binding Agreement.* I'm here to help."

"Help? I'm afraid the time for that passed a while back."

The door opened.

I expected to see another skeletal, shuffling figure, but this man was portly, almost fat. He was unshaven and smelled ripe, but otherwise seemed healthy.

"Peter Clarke?"

He hurried me inside and closed the door quickly. He led me through to a room piled knee deep in food cartons, beer cans and dirty clothing. It smelled worse than I did after a night on the town. The curtains had been pulled closed and the air felt stale and warm. There hadn't been a window opened in here for a long time.

"It's the maid's day off," he said, and spilled a waterfall of trash on the floor to make room for me to sit on an armchair. I let myself down gingerly, making sure I was going to be able to get back up before committing myself.

I lit up a smoke as soon as he sat opposite me. It helped some with the smell, but not quite enough.

We sat and looked at each other for a while.

"You're looking well," I said when he showed no signs of talking.

"In the circumstances, I suppose I can't really complain. I could be dead, like the other three."

"Other five," I said softly.

He went pale.

"I'm the last?"

I nodded.

"Then it must be *huge* by now," he said.

I didn't have to ask him what he meant.

"I've seen it," I said. "But I don't know exactly what I was looking at. Care to fill me in?"

He lifted a six pack of beer and threw a can towards me. I was careful to give it a good wipe with the arm of my jacket before opening it. It was warm, but went down well enough.

"It was Duncan's fault," he began. "We were just a few days into the diet and we started talking about targets. Between the six of us we decided to lose around ten stone.

"'That's a full person's worth', Duncan said. And that's what got me thinking that we should make ourselves a promise. So I had the contract written up, that we would go on until enough weight was lost to add up to a person. It was my idea that we sign it in blood, to seal the deal."

He laughed bitterly.

"It was supposed to be a joke… just something to focus our attention. How was I to know that it wasn't all bullshit?"

"Well, you know now," I replied. I lit a second cigarette.

"I had an inkling when Annie died," he said. "And then when

the other two were taken at the office, I knew something was up. So I did some reading. Two nights later something scratched at my door after I'd had my supper, but I'd taken precautions and put up the protection. And it's kept working."

"You've been here ever since?"

He waved at the detritus around us.

"Welcome to my world."

"And you knew how to stop this thing, but you let it take your friends anyway?"

He shrugged.

"I figured if it was pestering them, then it wasn't pestering me. Beside, if they had any smarts of their own, they could have figured it out the same way I did."

I was getting angry now, and had to push it down.

"They died horrible, piteous deaths you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy."

He shrugged again.

"Shit happens," he said.

I had nothing more to say to this *thing*. The white beast had more humanity in it that he would ever have.

I stood and walked to the front door. He followed me and stood in the hallway.

"So you have no regrets for their deaths?"

"Survival of the fittest," he said. "I win."

He closed the door on me.

I turned to leave.

It stood there in the shadows beside the small porch… a white figure as tall as a man but unformed, featureless save for a gaping maw of a mouth. It swayed from side to side and keened in a high wailing like a child's sob.

Survival of the fittest.

I turned back to the front door and wiped a smudge down the length of the protection spell. Then I walked away. I heard the door crash inwards as I reached the end of the driveway.

I might only have imagined that I heard the screams.

But I smiled anyway.

To the Sea Again

I want to tell you about a summer's night and a meeting which was to change our lives. But first you had better buy me a drink; I don't think I can tell it without at least one drink.

It was last year. Remember what a scorcher it was? Andy and I were sitting over there in the corner, as close to the open freezer door as we could get. There weren't many folks in that night. They were probably all lounging around on their porches, sipping cold drinks and complaining about the heat.

Andy was looking for some action: that seemed to be the be-all and end-all of his existence at the time. Seventeen years old, fit and strong and bored out of his mind with small town living.

“Come on Jim. What do you say?”

I took a long gulp of beer before replying. I know what he was asking. Take out the car, have a few beers and head over to Landford to suss out the nublies at the Trocadero.

“I don't think so Andy,” I replied, seeing the disappointment on his face. “It's too hot; that place will be like an oven. Do you really want to sweat a couple of buckets full, get ourselves a hangover and come home on our own again?”

We hadn't been having much luck with the girls lately. I think it had something to do with our air of desperation. Andy and I were what was known as 'nerds.' We didn't play football, we didn't hang around with the gangs, and, probably the worst sin, we were capable of passing exams.

So, not only were we shunned by our peers as being 'know-all dickheads,' we didn't have that spark of magic, of excitement that would allow us to get on with girls. Sometimes I felt that we had as aura around us, one that shouted 'These guys are nerds.'

Not that it worried me unduly. I knew it was only a matter of time before I got out. One more set of exams then it was bye-bye small town, and heigh-ho off to University.

Andy couldn't wait though. I think his hormones had finally woken up, and all he could talk about was women. Well, not women as such; just how he could use their bodies in a variety of sex acts.

I was about to have another try at getting him on to a different subject when it suddenly went cold. Goosebumps ran the length of my arm. I thought of something my mother always said, “Someone just walked over my grave,” when I noticed that it wasn't just happening to me. Andy was rubbing his arm and, incredibly, there was a thin film of frost on our beer glasses.

I began to speak, and that's when I caught it; the unmistakable salt-tang of the sea. It was something I'd only ever smelled once before, ten years and three hundred miles away, but I had never forgotten it. Then, as quickly as it had come, it passed on, leaving us with just the memory and the sudden condensation on our glasses. We looked at each other, and I could see the wide-eyed wonder in Andy's eyes. I looked around the room, but no-one else seemed to have noticed anything. There was old Joe fanning himself with his newspaper, and Eileen the waitress tugging her halter top away from her body. At any other time that small scene would have sent my blood racing, but at that moment I was too confused to take any notice.

And then they came in. You have to have come from a small town to realise the impact that three strangers can make in a quiet bar. Old Joe's newspaper stopped in mid-fan, and I swear that if his jaw had dropped any further it would have hit the table. Eileen was frozen with her halter pulled away from her chest and she took two steps back before she realised where she was. I didn't blame her. I felt like getting out myself.

They looked like escapees from a fancy dress party, but somehow you knew that this was no pantomime. The clothes looked worn, lived in; they didn't have that crisp newness which always characterised hired clothes. I immediately thought of actors, people off the set for a quick drink; but who made pirate movies these days? Of the three, it was the middle one who caught my attention. Imagine Errol Flynn playing a buccaneer and you have some idea of his swaggering, cocksure presence. But Errol Flynn never looked this. His left eye had gone, leaving only a blackened, charred hole to complement the sky-blue twinkle from the right, and he only had an index finger and a thumb on his right hand. I wouldn't have noticed that so soon, but he was pulling at a lump of scar tissue where his left ear had once been, and it was hard to miss. The metallic click of his sabre against his belt echoed loudly in the suddenly quiet room.

“Rum!” he shouted. “A pint of rum for three thirsty men of the sea,” and banged his fist down hard on the bar.

Nobody moved. Old Joe looked like he had been frozen to the spot, and I was trying hard to blend into the background. Somehow I didn't want these guys to register my presence.

“Rum!” he shouted again, and this time all three of them banged on the bar. Eileen came out of her daze and moved behind the bar to serve them. They might look as weird as a five-legged dog, but business is business. Her first mistake was to try and make small talk.

“So what do you guys do?” she asked.

They looked at her as if she was something nasty they had just

stepped in, and then the big guy turned his good eye on her.

“Women are fine for bedding and bearing brats, but I've yet to meet one that made a fair barkeep.”

His companions guffawed, and then the big one did it; the thing that changed the whole tack of our lives. He reached out and began to paw at Eileen's breasts.

I was out of my chair in a second, but Andy was even faster. He was already past me and well on his way across the room when I heard the metallic slide of metal on metal as a sabre was drawn from its scabbard.

“Leave her alone you bastards!” Andy shouted, and made a lunge for the big man. He lasted two seconds. That's the length of time it took for the man to release his sabre and club Andy over the head with the heavily armoured hilt. Andy fell in a limp bundle and Eileen screamed, just once, before the room fell silent.

I was in no-man's-land, caught in the space between the safety of my seat and the crumpled body on the floor. All I could do was giggle nervously as the big guy turned his one good eye on me.

“How about you, pup?” he said, and I swear there was a starry twinkle in his eye. “Do you have the same spunk as your young friend here?”

That was the pivotal moment. I knew it, and he knew it. And that was when I was found wanting.

My mouth had gone dry, and yet again I felt the goosebumps race across my arms; but it wasn't the cold this time. I willed my legs to move, willed my mouth to speak, but all I got was that same pathetic giggle.

There was a look of disappointment in the big man's eye as he turned to his companions.

“Looks like it's only the one then,” he said, and motioned to them to pick Andy up. They carried him between them as they made their way to the door. And I didn't even move, feeling nothing but the dry. cold taste of cowardice in my mouth.

That blue eye was staring at me again when I looked back to the bar.

“Are you sure you don't want to protect the virtue of this fine wench?” he said, and laughed, a deep booming thing that set the lights swinging above him. I shivered again as he ran a callused hand over Eileen's cheek, but still I didn't move.

“Ah well,” he muttered. “Maybe next time.”

He leaned over and took a bottle of whisky from the bar as he left, the evil, metallic clicking of his sabre echoing round in my skull even after the door had closed behind him.

Joe and I stared at each other for a long time, my fear reflected

in his eyes, but it was the look I got from Eileen that made me move.

It wasn't so much the disgust that bothered me, it was the pity; and it was the pity that drove me away from her, away from the bar and out of the door into the night.

She was nestled in the cornfield, the yellow waves lapping at her hull, and I couldn't believe it. She was blue and silver and white, all at the same time, and the moonlight glistened in a rainbow aurora off her rigging.

A gangplank stretched down towards me, black and inviting, and her name stood out in gleaming white from her bow: “The Saucy Sue,” registered in Liverpool, 1607. Her sails were full and stretched to their limit, although the night was so still I could hear my heart pounding. And up there above me, on the deck, I saw the two men drop Andy at their feet, and I heard their manic laughter as they disappeared out of my sight.

The big man was nowhere to be seen, and I think that's what allowed me to function; if he'd still been around then I don't think I could have made my next move. As it was I didn't really think about it; I was up the gangplank and on to the deck before my hindbrain had time to be worried. I was almost surprised to find firm, hard wood beneath my feet.

Andy was still out when I got to him, but he was breathing steadily and there was no blood. He was going to have one hell of a black eye, though.

I had just got my arms underneath his shoulders and had just begun to drag him toward the gangplank when I heard the voice at my back.

“So, m'lad. You have more spunk than I thought.”

I almost wet myself, and I just managed to get a foot under Andy's head as it fell to the deck. I turned to face the one-eyed pirate.

He was leaning on his drawn sabre, the bottle of whisky at his lips. He was now wearing a hat, a huge, plumed monstrosity of a thing that flopped above his forehead, casting his eyes in shadow. I could still see the glint in that crystal-blue eye.

“Have you come to join us?” he said, his voice a whisper as he stared at the sky. “To sail to the mountains of the moon, to clip along the Spanish Main, running just ahead of the wind, to see the great whales feed off the krill at the edge of the great ice sheets, to search for the sea serpents in the black depths of the yellow seas. Have you come to join us?”

“No,” I said, but my voice was muffled by the one from my feet. I looked down to see Andy looking straight at the pirate.

“Yes,” Andy said.

The pirate slapped his thigh and that great laugh boomed out

once more. The resemblance to Errol Flynn was even more pronounced.

“Raise the anchor,” he shouted, and two men appeared from below decks to do his bidding. ”Set sail for the west. We have a long journey and two new recruits to break in.”

“No,” I said again, louder this time, and looked to Andy for support, but he was staring around the ship, eyes wide in wonder.

I grabbed him by the shoulder and turned him around to face me.

”Andy. We have to get off this thing.”

He shook his head.

“No Jim. You go. This is what I want.” He pushed me away, toward the gangplank, but my body was blocked by the tall pirate.

“You both stay,” he said, and this time there was no humour in his voice. “Bosun!” he shouted. “Two deckhands to be broken in.”

There was a sudden loud creak, and I felt the boat sway under my feet as the stars started to spin in the sky. That was enough for me. I leapt from the rail, vaulting over it, feeling the pirate grab at my ankles but not strongly enough to stop me.

I fell and fell, and blackness spun around me, and I tensed myself for a hard landing before suddenly and unexpectedly I hit water and tasted that long-forgotten flavour of salt water in my mouth. I looked up and could just see the great ship fade into the black sky.

I think, at the last, I heard Andy's voice; a small thing in the distance that called just one word.

“Goodbye.”

There's not much more to tell. I was at the sea-shore, four hundred miles from home; and that in itself look a lot of explaining. I made up some story about Andy and I running away, but I'm not sure anyone actually believed me.

I fell behind in my schooling and I never did make it to University. Nowadays I mostly sit in the bar, jawing with Joe and Eileen, all of us trying to make sense of what happened that night; all of us waiting for those hot sultry nights, waiting with a mixture of trepidation and excitement for the salt tang to come back.

The First Silkie

Long ago, and far to the north where the ice meets the sea and the great white bears prowl for unwary travelers, there was an island of sea-faring folk who were renowned for their prowess in fishing.

It is said that every time they took to sea their nets bulged heavy…so heavy that they had to throw back more than twice what they were able to carry. Nothing that swam in the seas was safe, for the men were so gifted that no shoal could hide from them. Across the seas of Midgard their sails blew tight in the spray, and their songs swelled with the wind as they hunted.

So big were their catches, so bountiful were their tables that their fame at last reached as far as Valhalla, to the halls of Odin himself. And even Odin, the master hunter, was in awe of the exploits that were related at his table. But the tales were so tall, seemingly so exaggerated, that the old God would not swallow them, for he had heard many tales over his long years, and was wise enough to know that the teller was just as important as the tale itself.

So he sent his son Loki to find out if the stories were true, for Loki was a teller of tall tales himself, and would know a lie if one faced him.

"Bring me the truth of it," Odin said, and Loki smiled sweetly, though the truth was little more than a passing stranger to the Trickster.

For long months he searched the circling sea, and many great and mighty things did he learn. And everywhere he went he heard tales of the great fishermen of the North, who had risen in greatness so far among the other seafaring folks that they might even be gods themselves.

And Loki saw this, and was enraged that mere fisherfolk might usurp the place of the mighty in the hearts of common men.

After long journeys he came to the land of the fishermen on a sunny day in summer and saw the nets bulging with the herring, the silver mounds filling the harbors and inlets for many leagues around.

And the townsfolk saw him, and took him in, and there was a great feast. Ragna, the King of the Fisherfolk, took Loki to his side at the high table, and there was much talk of fish and fishermen. The ale flowed freely, and talk grew loose.

"King Ragna," Loki said, rising from his seat at the table. "You are truly a great hunter. Surely Odin himself would not take so much in his nets."

Now Ragna, who cared little for the ways of the gods, grew boastful,

“No disrespect to your father lad, but he is a land hunter. No one is better on the water than I. I can catch anything that swims,” he said.

Now Ragna’s daughter, Myrna, was a great beauty and Loki had his eye on her throughout the feast. So when Ragna made his boast, Loki laid his trap, for he had seen a way to take the girl, yet still explain himself back in Valhalla.

“I have a wager for you, King Ragna,” the god said. “On the morrow we will take to the boats, and I will show you what I wish you to catch. If you succeed, I will promise to tell Odin himself that Ragna is the King of all Fisherfolk.”

“And if I fail?”

“If you fail, I take the hand of your daughter Myrna, in marriage,” the god said.

Now Ragna saw this as a wager where he could not lose, and the King and the god shook hands on the deal.

On the morrow they took to the water in the boats, and all the menfolk of the people went with them.

Loki took them to the south, to land’s they had never before fished, in seas they had never before sailed. And great was the bounty in the waters, where the shoals of herring stretched for miles and the whales dived in their hundreds.

“And what is it you wish us to catch, my lord,” Ragna said to Loki. And Loki smiled, for he had a secret.

“I have a special catch for you this day, King Ragna.” And suddenly, all around their boats, the heads of seals bobbed in the water, their plaintive cries echoing across the water.

“But these are no sport,” the King said.

“Nevertheless, these are your wager,” Loki replied.

So the fisherfolk went to it with gusto. They sang as they hauled the catches in, and soon their nets were full to the busting with the screaming seals. But their songs soon turned to wails, for as their catch left the water the seals began to change, into wives, and daughters, into mother and sister, the womenfolk of the fishermen, now all gasping for air.

“Like fish out of water,” Loki said and laughed.

King Ragna ordered the catch put back, but he was too late, and the bodies of the dead floated around them. All save one, a single seal that sang a plaintive song of loss and sorrow as the men in the boats wept.

“It seems you have lost the wager King Ragna. It seems I have to tell Odin I am a better fisherman than you, for look…I have got myself a sea wife, your daughter, Myrna.”

And Ragna, in his rage, lifted Loki from the deck, but the god

merely laughed and changed his form to a huge black crow, whose cawing laugh echoed long after it had flown in to the north.

And Loki returned to Odin, and told a tale of how the fisherfolk had thought them selves above even Odin himself, and how he, Loki, had tricked them. But he did not tell of the deaths of the womenfolk, and although Odin knew there was a lie in the tale, he could not separate the bigger lie from the smaller one, and in time the affairs of Asgard took precedence over the affairs of men.

Far away in Midgard, Ragna made a new home, there where his daughter swam and sang. And great was the sorrow of the people, for without the womenfolk they grew old and died, and none followed them.

And it came to pass that King Ragna became an old, bent, man, and he was the last of his people. And with his dying breath he called down a curse on the sons of Loki…that they would come when one of Myrna's blood called, that they would be father and protector of Myrna's children, that they would be cursed to serve the very line that Loki had tried to erase.

And high in his halls, great Odin heard, and now he knew of Loki's perfidy. So he sent to Myrna a song, a lay that would entice the sons of Loki. And even as King Ragna's eyes were closing for the last time, he heard the song, and saw, on the beach, a seal turn into a man, a man called to be the first, first of the sea-husbands.

From Between

By the time I arrived at Eillan Eighe I was wet, miserable, and dearly missing my warm apartments back in the college. But Roger had called for me, and although we had not met for several years the bonds between us were still taut, and I could do naught but answer when his telegram arrived.

I regretted it at that point of course, standing in the Western Highlands on a wet mud track in the gathering gloom, with rain beating on my head and cold water seeping into my ten guinea brogues.

But just as I was about to turn and head back for the dry waiting room in the railway station I turned a corner, and the glen opened up ahead of me. And there, little more than a mile distant, sat the squat cubic keep that was Roger's ancestral home, Eillan Eighe.

Roger himself welcomed me at the door.

“Come in man,” he said. He helped me out of my sodden overcoat, and showed me into a hall dominated by a huge fireplace and a roaring log fire.

He sat me down in an armchair and placed a tumbler full of whisky in my hand.

I was so relieved to finally get some heat into my bones that it was several minutes before I realised that my friend was not the man I remembered him to be.

We'd first met before the war, at Oxford. We made a strange pair, him tall and ruddy and full of rude health, and me, short, pale and permanently marked by a childhood pox that had almost claimed me. But we found common interest in the wonders of modern science, and had sat up late into the night on many occasions wondering at the implications of the work of Rutherford, Bohr and Einstein.

Then the war came, and we came to see the dark side of man's invention. Roger was never the same after returning from the Somme. He would not talk of it, but one look into his eyes told me everything I needed to know of the horrors that plagued his dreams.

The rigours of battle not withstanding, he had seemed on his way back to some kind of health when I'd last seen him in our club in Piccadilly in '21.

But no longer.

When I looked over to where he sat by the piano, he seemed less the country gentleman, and more like some gothic aesthete, a romantic poet suffering for his art. He was so pale, so wan that his veins showed blue at hands and forehead, and his hair, once black and vibrant, hung in lank grey strands at the nape of his neck. His eyes looked like two black coals sunk in snow, and his hands trembled as

they reached for a whisky glass.

“Dear God man,” I said. “Whatever is the matter with you?”

He managed to raise a small smile, and for a second, my old friend was there.

“Bad day at the office old boy. I'm glad you've come. I need you.”

I rose and went to him. I took his hand and checked his pulse. It was thin, thready, running like a train.

“You don't need me. You need a doctor.”

“Not now,” he said. “Not when I'm so close.”

“The only thing you're close to is death's door.”

He smiled once more, and swallowed a large dose of whisky, which immediately brought some colour to his cheeks.

“Not when the water of life is so readily available.”

He moved quickly to the piano, surprising me with his speed.

“I will show you why I asked for you to come.”

He started to play. I immediately noticed that his style was clumsy and forced, but the piano was in good tune, and the height of the hall gave the acoustics a resonance and depth that hid a multitude of playing sins. What Roger lacked in style, he more than made up for in vigour, and the room rang as he pounded out a succession of minor chords.

Sweat poured from his brow, and his breath became short and shallow, but still he pounded.

I moved to put a stop to the insanity... just as an answering pounding arose from below.

I felt it first through the soles of my feet, but soon my whole frame shook, vibrating in time with the rhythm. My head swam, and it seemed as if the very walls of the keep melted and ran. The fireplace receded into a great distance until it was little more than a pinpoint of light in a blanket of darkness, and I was alone, in a vast cathedral of emptiness where nothing existed save the dark and the pounding beat from below.

Shapes moved in the dark, wispy shadows with no substance, shadows that capered and whirled as the dance grew ever more frenetic.

I tasted salt water in my mouth, and was buffeted, as if by a strong, surging tide, but as the beat grew ever stronger I cared little. I gave myself to it, lost in the dance, lost in the dark.

I know not how long I wandered, there in the space between. I forgot myself, forgot my friend, in a blackness where only rhythm mattered.

And I do believe I would be there yet if Roger had not come to the end of his endurance.

I snapped out of my reverie at the same moment as Roger, exhausted, slumped over the piano. The rhythm from below died and faded, and the room once more filled back in around me, leaving me weak and disoriented. I only came full back to my senses when Roger slid off the piano stool and fell, insensate, on the stone floor.

I took time to take a long slug from his whisky glass to fortify myself before I bent to lift him. He was out cold, and it took all of my strength to get him into the armchair by the fire. By the time I got him seated upright with a rug around him, he had started to snore gently.

Exhausted, I helped myself to more of the whisky and sat myself in the chair on the other side of the grate. For a while I kept close watch on my friend, but sleep was waiting for me, and I gave myself to it with no small relief.

There were no dreams.

~-o0O0o-~

Roger woke me early.

There was a sheepish grin on his face as he placed a plate of bacon and eggs on my lap.

“No standing on ceremony old chap,” he said. “Just tuck in.”

He still looked pale, but not in any imminent danger of keeling over.

“What about last night… What...?”

He didn't let me finish.

“Breakfast first, to set you up for the day ahead. I'll explain soon. I promise.”

He stoked the fire while I ate. The bacon was burnt and the eggs fried until I could have bounced them on the floor, but I do believe it was the most welcome breakfast of my life.

“Don't you have servants for that?” I mumbled through some soggy toast as he poked at the embers.

Once more he grinned as he stood away from the grate.

“They all left. The piano playing got too much for them,” he said, and laughed loudly, so much so that I could almost believe that last night's escape had been no more than the fevered dream of a tired man.

“Now finish that off,” he said. “I have something else to show you… something that only you can help me with.”

I wolfed down the last of the toast and followed him out of the room.

He was more animated this morning, more like the boy I knew at Oxford.

“This place is ancient,” he said as he led me through to a

scullery that was piled high with unwashed dishes and pots. “The first of my line built it nigh on seven hundred years ago…. And there have always been stories told that he built it atop a far older settlement.”

He opened a door, revealing a set of steps leading down into what I took to be a cellar.

“I got bored in the summer and decided to do some impromptu archaeology.”

He lit a firebrand and led me down a winding staircase which opened out some twenty feet below into a large chamber.

It was immediately obvious that it was man made. The walls were built of large blocks of sandstone. I had visited several Neolithic tombs, in Carnac, in Orkney and on Salisbury Plain. This gave the same sense of age, of a time long past. What I hadn't expected, what was completely different, was the overwhelming feeling that this place was in use. The walls ran damp and there was a salt tang in the air but there was no sign of moss or lichen on the walls - only the damp glistening stone.

Roger moved over to one wall and held the firebrand closer.

“Here,” he said. “Here's why I called for you.”

The wall was covered in small, tightly packed carvings. At first I thought it might be a language, but it was none that I recognised from my studies, indeed, it bore no resemblance to anything I had ever seen before.

“I can't make head or tail of them,” Roger said. “But I believe they hold the secret.”

I followed him as he walked, lighting stone after stone covered in the densely packed markings.

“Whatever they are, it'll take weeks just to transcribe them.”

Roger smiled again, the red from the torchlight casting a demonic cast to his visage.

“Three months, two weeks and four days. Come, I'll show you.”

He bounded back up the stairway, leaving me momentarily alone there in the dark.

“Come on then,” he shouted. “You didn't come all this way for nothing did you?”

I followed the fading glow of his firebrand up the twists of the staircase, and eventually found Roger back in the hall by the fireplace.

He thrust a thick sheaf of papers at me.

“I've no idea what might be the start or end point,” he said as I took them from him and sat in the armchair. He hovered around me like an excited puppy until I was forced to admonish him.

“Roger, give me some time. This will not be easy. If you must do something, fetch my pipe from my overcoat.”

He grinned again, and I began to believe that my old friend

wasn't so far beneath the surface after all.

~-o0O0o-~

For the rest of that first day I struggled with the script. When it became apparent that an answer would not be immediately forthcoming, Roger left me alone. I heard him clattering around in the scullery, and then later, I'm sure I heard him singing in the cavern beneath the hall, but for the most part I was engrossed in the puzzle before me.

The figures had been transcribed in Roger's neat, methodical hand and, indeed, for a while I thought they might be a vast mathematical formula, a construct born out of Roger's malaise. But I had seen the carvings for myself. They were obviously from antiquity... And equally obviously baffling.

Night fell, and I was no further forward. Roger fed me with over cooked trout and hard potatoes before once more sitting me in front of the fire. I nursed a large whisky and stared into the flames, trying to clear my head of images of scratches on walls.

I was surprised when Roger started to speak, his voice so low it was almost a whisper.

“We have never talked of the trenches,” he said.

“And we do not have to if it pains you,” I replied, but he waved me down.

“No. It is germane to why we are here.”

He took a long draught from his whisky.

“I dream,” he said. “I see them, there in the mud, half-obscured by acrid smoke lit red by the flares; Private Jones, his face melted by a cloud of mustard gas, Corporal MacLean, his guts on the outside, fighting weakly as the rats tear at them, my batman, Donnie, staring at his legs which are lying in the mud clear across the trench.”

Tears ran down Roger's cheeks.

“And every night it is the same question. Why?”

“Why did they die?”

“No,” Roger said, and sobbed. “Why did I live?”

I could only watch as the grief ate away at my friend. He was quiet for long minutes, but I knew him well enough to know there was more to come.

“I came home, hoping that here at least the memories of a happy childhood might blot out the mud and blood. But still they came, every night.”

He rose and poured himself another stiff drink.

“I have tried everything I can to dull my sense...opiates, ether, but mostly this,” he said waving the whisky glass at me. “But nothing

worked... Until one night, in my frustration, I pounded at the piano.

“And, from below something answered. For however a short time, my dreams fell still.”

He downed a whisky that would have floored me, poured another and returned to his seat by the fire.

“The rest you know... I dug, and found the chamber and the carvings.”

“But what is it?” I asked. “I can make neither head nor tail of your transcriptions.”

Once more he stared into the fire.

“I believe it is a window, a way for us to view worlds beyond those which we inhabit. We know that atoms are composed of mostly free space and vibration. Well, possibly, the vibrations set up in the chamber allow us to alter normal space and time, to travel beyond, or maybe, as I suspect is the case, between.”

“But why would you want to?” I said, astonished.

His eyes took on a far away look.

“Because there is a dreamer there whose dreams are stronger than mine, a dreamer oblivious to the petty squabbles of men, dreaming an endless dream in which I might lose myself.”

“But that way lies madness.”

“No old friend," he said softly. "That is something with which I am already familiar. Will you help me?”

~-o0O0o-~

I slept fitfully, my dreams troubled, not by the chamber and its incomprehensible carvings, but by a vast plain where guns roared like great drums in a blood red sky and clouds of death passed over the broken bodies of a million moaning men.

The morning found me back in the armchair by the fire, seeking solace in the comforting normality of my pipe. Roger eschewed breakfast, and came and sat on the piano stool. He lit up a cheroot and soon we were putting up a fug worthy of London on a damp evening in October.

“Did you come to a decision?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“Not completely. But I intend to keep working on your puzzle. It has me intrigued.”

And that’s when I had the epiphany. Frustrated, Roger drummed his fingers on the piano, a martial beat, only a few seconds long. The piano rang in sympathy… and the answer came to me, all at once.

“It’s not a language… it’s a musical notation.”

Roger merely looked at me in astonishment as I jumped out of

my chair and headed for the piano. I spread his transcribed papers over the top.

"Look. These lines, separated into groups corresponding to quavers, minims and crotchets… but it's not music as such… there is no sense of a scale."

Roger drummed his fingers once more, and again the piano resonated in sympathy.

I moved him off the stool and sat down at the instrument.

"So if it's not music… it must be rhythm," I said. "Rhythm and vibration."

I shuffled the papers and placed them on the music stand in front of me.

"How do you know where to start?" Roger said.

"I don't. Let us just see if I am right first."

I picked a solid minor chord, and began striking the keyboard in time with the rhythm transposed on the pages. Almost immediately I felt the sympathetic resonance rise from the chamber beneath.

"It's working," Roger shouted. But I was already lost in a world of pounding chords.

Something was far wrong. I knew it at an intellectual level. But the music controlled me deeper than that, in the hindbrain where the evolutionary equivalent of a gibbering monkey hit a log with a stick and enjoyed the noise. My hands pounded the keyboard, hands clenched into fists. The beat sped up a notch and the walls shook, loose mortar falling from the ceiling.

Just as I felt I could go no further, the beat slowed, mellowed.

As it had the first time, my head swam, and the walls of the keep melted and ran. The fireplace receded into a great distance until it was little more than a pinpoint of light in a blanket of darkness, and I was again alone, in a vast cathedral of emptiness.

A tide took me, a swell that lifted me and transported me, faster than thought, to the green twilight of ocean depths far distant.

I realised I was not alone. We floated mere shadows now, scores… nay, tens of scores of us, in that cold silent sea. I was aware that Roger was near, but I had no thought for aught but the rhythm, the dance. Far below us, cyclopean ruins shone dimly in a luminescent haze. Columns and rock faces tumbled in a non-Euclidean geometry that confused the eye and brooked no close inspection. And something deep in those ruins knew we were there.

We dreamed, of vast empty spaces, of giant clouds of gas that engulfed the stars, of blackness where there was nothing but endless dark, endless quiet. And while our slumbering god dreamed, we danced for him, there in the twilight, danced to the rhythm.

We were at peace.

~-o0O0o-~

I came to lying on the floor beside the piano. The first thing I was aware of was the pain in my hands; my knuckles bloodied and torn. But my own pain was forgotten at the sight of Roger.

He lay in the centre of the room on his back, eyes open, staring at the ceiling, a broad smile on his face.

It is only now, more than fifteen years later, that I can bring myself to write about these events. In all that time Roger has never awakened. He is alive, but no longer seeing, borne away, somewhere where the green twilight flickers and the slumbering god dreams.

He is at peace.

And now, as the war drums of Europe beat once again in a quickening rhythm, I dearly wish I had gone with him.

~-o0O0o-~

AUTHOR'S NOTE

If you're looking for a taster of my work, this is who I am. These seven short stories, all previously published in magazines or anthologies, contain magic, monsters, ghosts, history, beer, Scotland, scifi, fantasy, horror, singing, more beer and fun.

This is who I am.

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VARIATIONS ON A THEME - Wrongworld (US) Apr 2008
BAIT AND SWITCH - Suddenly Lost in Words (US) 2011
AT THE TRIAL OF THE LOATHESOME SLIME - Fools Motley (UK) 2003
THE WATCHER IN THE DUNES - Grotesque (UK) 1996
A SLIM CHANCE - Cat of Nine Tales (US) 2012
TANNIS - Pegasus (US) 2000
TO THE SEA AGAIN – The Harrow (US) 1996
FROM BETWEEN - Wrongworld (US) Feb 2008